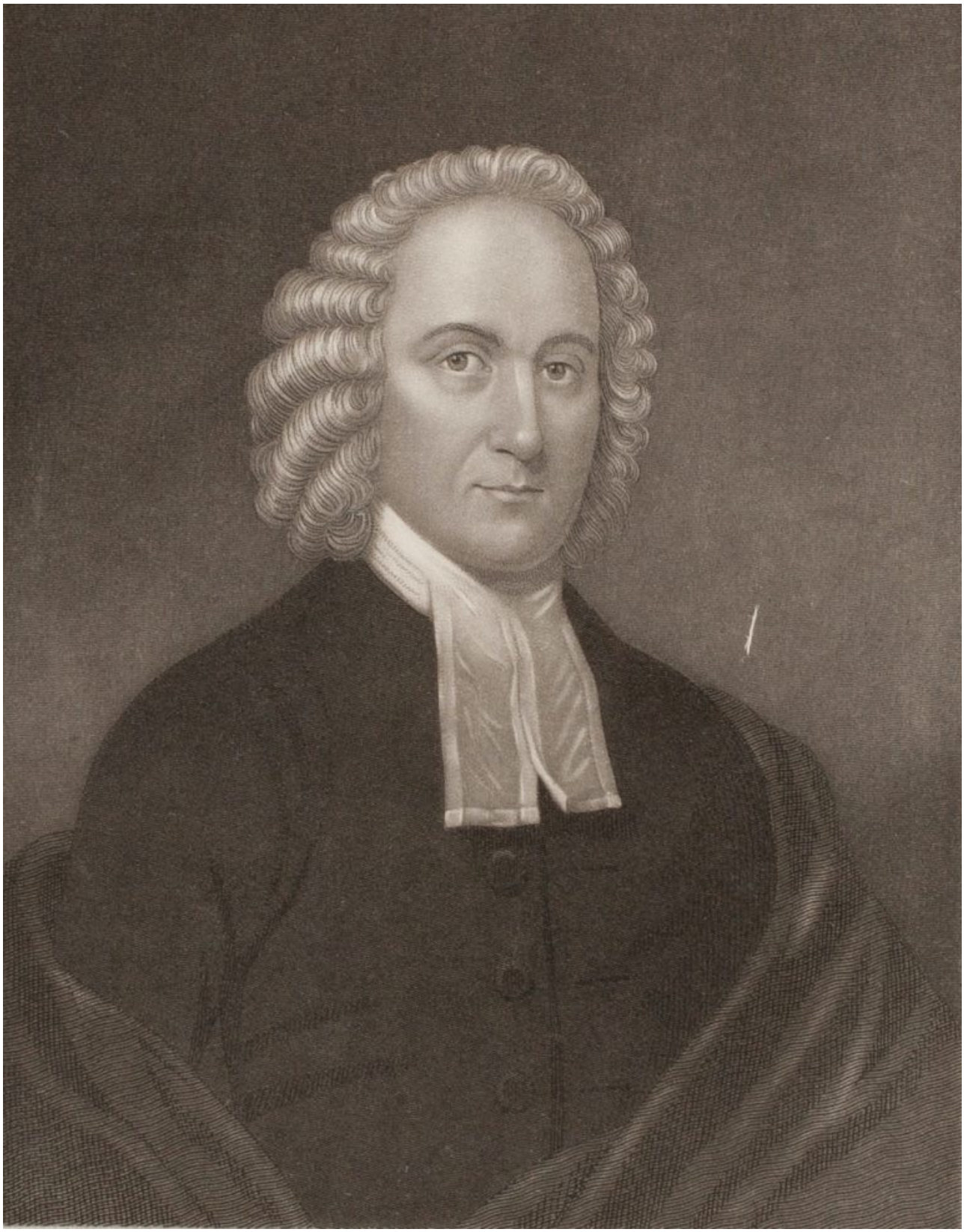
An ‘Epidemical Distemper’: Conversion and Disorder, then and now

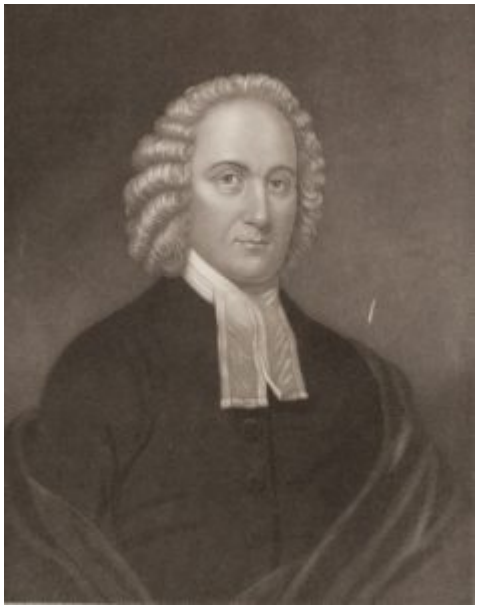


On March 11, 2012, the New York Times Sunday Magazine ran a cover story about a small town in western New York where eighteen female high school students had recently begun twitching uncontrollably. One bruised her face with her own cell phone; others uttered involuntary cries in the school halls which teachers tried bravely to ignore. Fears of toxic contamination from an old train wreck brought social activist Erin Brockovich to the scene, while psychologists made the more widely persuasive diagnosis of conversion disorder, or—since multiple individuals were involved—mass psychogenic illness. Environmentally induced malady or psychosomatic pathology? In this debate, perhaps even more than the girls' behaviors alone, the contorted bodies of Le Roy, New York, powerfully suggest another group of twitching girls from almost two centuries before. There too, leading intellectuals used the events of a town few had heard of—Northampton, Massachusetts—to justify conflicting worldviews by making exemplary subjects of young women undergoing a shared affliction. Characterized by "outcries, faintings, convulsions and such like," their behavior was described in eerily similar terms to that of the Le Roy girls with their "facial tics, body twitches, vocal outbursts, seizures." Spastic girls, writhing girls, girls in pain, girls out of control. All made for good reading, in 1737 as again in 2012.

Both events share key features: from the use of the term "conversion," to the attention brought to bear on an otherwise unremarkable location, to public figures' use of the phenomenon for self-promotion, to the predominance of women in their exposition. In all these arenas, we will see that the struggle to interpret these behaviors correctly was also a struggle about social order. The crisis in Le Roy—a town of less than 10,000 in New York's rust belt, between Rochester and Buffalo—began with one person, a seventeen-year-old high school cheerleader who woke up from a nap in the fall of 2011 experiencing facial spasms. Within a couple of months, three other girls, two of them cheerleaders, had similar symptoms, including stuttering and uncontrollable tics. Eventually, at least eighteen members of the high school were afflicted, all teenage girls except for two. The seemingly inexplicable nature of this contagion made for widespread media coverage (including local TV news, live appearances on "Dr. Drew," online reporting by well-established sites such as *The Daily Beast*, and profiles in some of the nation's most august print outlets). As public attention has diminished (and with it the strange combination of stress and sudden fame that may have fueled the symptoms in the first place), many individuals have recovered. Slightly less than a year after that fateful nap, one local station reported that the girls' physical condition had improved significantly, with many living "symptom-free." As for the conditions that contributed to the malady—which could range from widespread economic decline, to the absence of fathers in most sufferers' lives, to the sometimes brutal social hierarchies of high school—they are perhaps even more mysterious, and more recalcitrant, than the tics themselves.

This essay explores the connection between these two related historical phenomena. It asks why we continue to see shared involuntary behaviors among young women in such oppositional terms, and what the stakes are behind our

focus on female adolescents as a barometer of the state of our communities. Why, in the words of New Hampshire minister Ethan Smith in 1815, must we make "instructive biography" out of female behavior that is extravagantly, pointedly not intended to be didactic? The more the experience itself seems to resist coherent interpretation (whether by being characterized by erratic behavior, or spreading from one to another through unknown means), the more various authorities invest in their own particular readings, each representative of a competing social viewpoint. As opposing groups fight to defend antagonistic beliefs, their accounts take on a life of their own, such that the women's existence becomes most important not in and of itself but rather as a register of broader cultural struggles. Somehow, bouts of intense, shared, atypical experience among young women attract attention both on the basis of their particular dramatic appeal and as uniquely pliable discourses in the service of ideological debate.



1. "Portrait of Jonathan Edwards," eng. A.B. Walter. Courtesy of the American Portrait Print Collection, the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

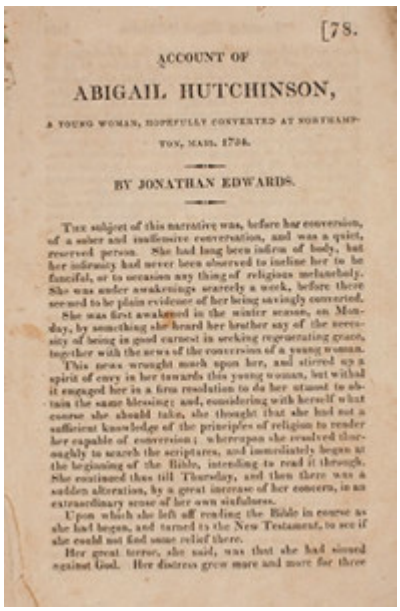
And yet these efforts to turn female experience into a "teachable moment" meet with curious resistance in the socially specific and physically freighted details that lard the narratives. Instructive biography stumbles under the weight of its own evidence, which compels our attention for reasons less salubrious than we might think or wish. While we may not share recent *New York Times* letter-writer Mark Schreiner's view, regarding the events of Le Roy, that "it is a crime that Americans living in other places would watch all this for their entertainment," it is undeniable that in both centuries, the suffering of otherwise unexceptional individuals brought their towns to the attention of a far-flung public. No one would have known about either event had the curiosity of strangers not driven an outpouring of print on the subject. And it is this curiosity, even more than the opposing viewpoints it allowed to see the light

of day, that makes seemingly passive bystanders—guilty of no more than buying a *New Yorker*—active partners in putting teenage girls to particular uses. Regardless of where we place our sympathies, as readers, TV-watchers, Internet surfers and more, we are complicit in what we choose to consume. And despite our recent self-consciousness about the potentially insidious nature of celebrity culture, whether for driving princesses (literally) to their death or for glorifying the salacious over the significant, the scandal of Northampton reminds us that the hunger for what Joseph Roach calls "intimate authentication" is nothing new. In fact, celebrity might be called the "enthusiasm" of our moment.

2. Title page of "Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against: A Sermon Preach'd at the Old Brick Meeting-House in Boston, The Lord's Day after the Commencement, 1742," by Charles Chauncy. Printed by J. Draper (Boston, 1742). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Our story begins with Northampton and its most famous parson, the philosopher Jonathan Edwards (fig. 1). Edwards ministered to Northampton during what we now often refer to as the "Great Awakening." This movement, which first swept the Anglo-American colonies during the mid-to-late 1730s, was characterized by a renewal of interest in religion, charismatic itinerant preaching, and new opportunities for religious participation on the part of the less privileged. Edwards is often identified as its greatest champion in colonial New England. While it would be an oversimplification to assume that he celebrated the complexities of religious activity during this period in any simplistic way, it is true that he rejoiced in the evangelical conversions it enabled, whereby formerly complacent individuals became deeply concerned about their spiritual state and, after much agonizing, often underwent a sudden and overwhelming experience of God's favor. It is also true that the movement attracted many enemies, especially among more established metropolitan congregations for whom religion was most important as a way of ensuring social stability—not as a means to intense personal experience that might "fill the world with contention and confusion." Roughly speaking, these two groups divided into the "New Light" and "Old Light" Congregationalists, and Edwards' most famous Old Light opponent, the so-called "[c]aptain of the antirevival forces," was Charles Chauncy, co-pastor of the First Church in Boston. In a sermon published in 1742, "Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against," Chauncy delivered his first scathing critique of the revival (fig. 2). Edwards, in turn, articulated his belief in the legitimacy of evangelical conversion in several publications, including the "Account of Abigail Hutchinson: a young woman, hopefully converted at Northampton, Mass, 1734" (fig. 3); *A Faithful Narrative* (fig. 4), first published in London in 1737, and America in 1738; and 1742's *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (fig. 5).

Such a nondescript location that Edwards' London publishers first located it in New Hampshire (following a misreading of "county" as "country," confusion ensued between "Hampshire County" in Massachusetts, where the town was located, and the similarly named American colony), Northampton was, to Edwards' great pride, a place where not much happened (much like Le Roy, New York, a town whose greatest claim to fame is that it is the birthplace of Jell-O). Its stolid character issued not so much from any inherent goodness on the part of its citizens, but rather from its geographic location. As Edwards explains in the opening paragraphs of "A Faithful Narrative": "Our being so far within the land, at a distance from seaports, and in a corner of the country, has doubtless been one reason why we have not been so much corrupted with vice, as most other parts." In other words, Northampton's relative freedom from corruption derived not from what the locale possessed but what it lacked: a coastline. Seaports were sites of scandalous and irregular behavior, bred out of the promiscuous interchange of strangers from foreign places and with suspect opinions. By contrast, when generally sober inland townsfolk behaved oddly, these manifestations were worthy of attention, since they were not the product of strange ideas imported from abroad. For Edwards, Northampton's relative isolation made it a veritable petri dish when dramatic happenings did arise.



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ACCOUNT OF

ABIGAIL HUTCHINSON,

A YOUNG WOMAN, HOPEFULLY CONVERTED AT NORTHAMPTON, MASS. 1734.

BY JONATHAN EDWARDS.

THE subject of this narrative was, before her conversion, of a sober and inoffensive conversation, and was a quiet, reserved person. She had long been infirm of body, but her infirmity had never been observed to incline her to be fanciful, or to occasion any thing of religious melancholy. She was under awakenings scarcely a week, before there seemed to be plain evidence of her being savingly converted.

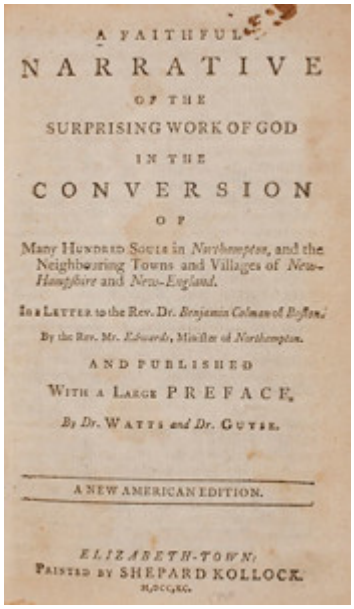
She was first awakened in the winter season, on Monday, by something she heard her brother say of the necessity of being in good earnest in seeking regenerating grace, together with the news of the conversion of a young woman.

This news wrought much upon her, and stirred up a spirit of envy in her towards this young woman, but withal it engaged her in a firm resolution to do her utmost to obtain the same blessing; and, considering with herself what course she should take, she thought that she had not a sufficient knowledge of the principles of religion to render her capable of conversion; whereupon she resolved thoroughly to search the scriptures, and immediately began at the beginning of the Bible, intending to read it through. She continued thus till Thursday, and then there was a sudden alteration, by a great increase of her concern, in an extraordinary sense of her own sinfulness.

Upon which she left off reading the Bible in course as she had begun, and turned to the New Testament, to see if she could not find some relief there.

Her great terror, she said, was that she had sinned against God. Her distress grew more and more for three

3. Title page of "Account of Abigail Hutchinson: A Young Woman, Hopefully Converted at Northampton, Mass. 1734," by Jonathan Edwards. Printed for the New England Tract Society by Flagg and Gould (Andover, Mass., 1816). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.


A FAITHFUL
NARRATIVE
OF THE
SURPRISING WORK OF GOD
IN THE
CONVERSION
OF
Many Hundred Souls in *Northampton*, and the Neighbouring Towns and Villages of *New-Hampshire* and *New-England*.
In a Letter to the Rev. Dr. *Benjamin Colman* of *Boston*,
By the Rev. Mr. *Edwards*, Minister of *Northampton*.
AND PUBLISHED
With a Large PREFACE,
By Dr. Watts and Dr. Guyse.
A NEW AMERICAN EDITION.
ELIZABETH-TOWN:
Printed by SHEPARD KOLLOCK.
M,DCC,XC.

4. Title page of A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton … Jonathan Edwards. Printed by Shepard Kollock (Elizabeth-town, N.J., 1790). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

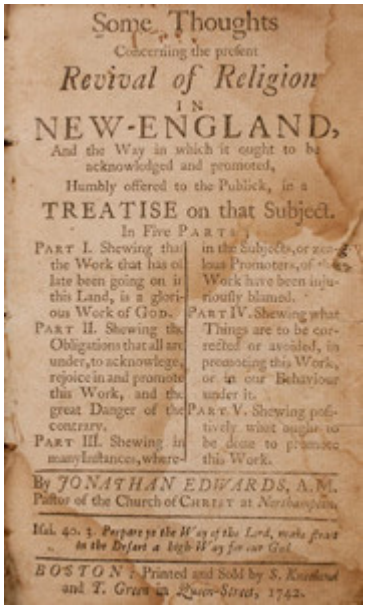
And yet, despite Edwards' strenuous insistence that inland towns were immune to foreign contagion, the very fact that he found this point necessary to make, and to make right away in *A Faithful Narrative*, suggests the defensiveness of his position. For there were many who saw corrupting influence aplenty in Northampton, proceeding not from recently arrived sailors and immigrants, but from longtime residents: ministers, lay preachers, and even fellow impressionable citizens. Had the term been available, these critics would no doubt have appreciated being able to append the term "disorder" to what Edwards called "conversion" (sadly for them, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV*, which lists conversion disorder, was more than 250 years in the future). And while the idea of "mass psychogenic illness" might be somewhat anachronistic, theologians skeptical of Northampton's transports had no trouble viewing the shared psychic complaint in the town as a form of pathology. In New Hampshire (the colony, not the county), John Caldwell referred to the many conversions of the period, especially among women, as an "epidemical distemper"—a contagious form of mental illness. Chauncy considered the phenomenon nothing less than "a disease, a sort of madness: And there are few: perhaps, none at all, but are subject to it." What Edwards saw as spiritual proof of God's blessing visited upon human vessels, Chauncy insisted was mere susceptibility to the manipulative wiles of unscrupulous cult leaders. Where Edwards celebrated a widespread dawning awareness of the saving power of Christ's love, Chauncy used the word "enthusiasm"—a term with negative connotations of false excess not entirely absent today—to describe something closer to insanity than awakening. In "Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against," he went so far as to suggest that the rapidly escalating outbursts of so-called converts were in fact

symptomatic of inherent, previously unsuspected moral laxity and even sexual licentiousness.

To understand the significance of Chauncy's opposition, it is necessary to let go of our contemporary associations with the word "enthusiasm." While we tend to consider this staple of recommendation letters primarily a term of praise, the eighteenth century remained more attuned to the word's implications of delusion. They also associated it with another thing familiar to us from the events of both 1737 and 2012: a susceptibility to contagion, or spreading from one person to another through unknown means. As early as 1708, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury wrote of "saving souls from the contagion of enthusiasm." Clearly, Chauncy did not invent the stance against "enthusiasm"; a precedent existed for denouncing mass religious awakening by seeing it as a form of potentially "epidemical" mental illness. Chauncy developed on this precedent to great effect, defining "enthusiasm" as follows:

> an *imaginary*, not a *real* inspiration: according to which sense, the *Enthusiast* is one, who has a conceit of himself as a person favoured with the extraordinary presence of the *Deity*. He mistakes the workings of his own passions for divine communications, and fancies himself immediately inspired by the SPIRIT of GOD, when all the while, he is under no other influence than that of an over-heated imagination.

Enthusiasts, it would seem, were the sentimentalists of the day, too ready with their tears and embraces, unable to discern that which deserved sympathetic attention from that which merely approximated truth in order to trick susceptible bystanders. They were not evil so much as deluded. Simply put, they were dupes. The true culprits were those, such as Edwards and some of his associates, who led these vulnerable souls to false belief—who "overheated" their imaginations. Chauncy's most convincing example was one John Davenport, who not only behaved rudely to the venerable minister himself but ended up rousing a mass of followers into a wig-burning mob on the wharf at New London, Connecticut. Chauncy addressed the letter introducing his published version of "Enthusiasm Described" to Davenport, as if to imply that he, not the far more famous Edwards, who had recently lectured at Yale, was behind the so-called spiritual transports of the day. Had Chauncy been around to witness the indignities visited upon the girls of Le Roy by their disorder, the hums and hallway outbursts and bruised shins, he would have found a perfect example of what to him remained pointless and humiliating self-abasement.


Some Thoughts
Concerning the present
Revival of Religion
IN
NEW-ENGLAND,
And the Way in which it ought to be
acknowledged and promoted,
Humbly offered to the Publick, in a
TREATISE on that Subject.
In Five Parts.
PART I. Shewing that the Work that has of late been going on in this Land, is a glorious Work of GOD.
PART II. Shewing the Obligations that all are under, to acknowledge, rejoice in and promote this Work, and the great Danger of the contrary.
PART III. Shewing in many Instances, wherein the Subjects, or zealous Promoters, of this Work have been injuriously blamed.
PART IV. Shewing what Things are to be corrected or avoided, in promoting this Work, or in our Behaviour under it.
PART V. Shewing positively what ought to be done to promote this Work.
By JONATHAN EDWARDS, A.M.
Pastor of the Church of CHRIST at Northampton.
Isai. 40. 3. Prepare ye the Way of the Lord, make strait in the Desart a high Way for our God.
BOSTON: Printed and Sold by S. Kneeland and T. Green in Queen-Street, 1742.

5. Title page of Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New-England … Jonathan Edwards (Boston, 1742). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

What Chauncy failed to note is that Edwards was no more enthusiastic about enthusiasm than were his colleagues in New Haven, Boston, and Connecticut. He lamented the “strange enthusiastic delusions” that characterized a period of crisis in Northampton in 1735, manifested by a spate of suicides and attempted suicides. And he deeply resented Davenport, who was generally recognized as an embarrassment to the revival. The only difference was that Chauncy considered *all* extreme displays of unseemly behavior to be forms of enthusiasm, whereas Edwards allowed for a certain leniency in the event of divine rapture. Even more galling to his detractors, Edwards claimed to be able to tell the difference between true and false inspiration, whereas Chauncy insisted that, since “we have no way of judging but by what is outward and visible,” the only way to determine a true Christian was by the degree to which he followed the rules laid out in that mother of all behavior manuals: the Bible.

Chauncy’s revulsion at the distempers on display in Northampton had many sources. Chief among them were the destabilizing effects of mass religious awakening on the established social order. When ordinary people who had once known their place in the social hierarchy and asked for no undue attention suddenly began acting out spiritual transports in public—when they began to consider their own felt experience as unique and important—far more than religious doctrine was at stake. Or, in Chauncy’s words: enthusiasm has “made strong attempts to destroy all property, to make all things common, *wives* as well as *goods*.”

Chauncy’s reference to “wives” as a form of property speaks to one important aspect of the social destabilization he found so abhorrent. Women were not the only citizens of Northampton to experience conversion during the period of

Edwards' time in the pulpit there, but they played an outsize role—as they do today, for reasons still poorly understood, in both conversion disorder and mass psychogenic illness. Not only did the so-called Great Awakening provide new opportunities for female religious participation, but the emotionality associated with it was also connected, in the minds of contemporary friends and foes alike, to forms of behavior (such as fainting) that had long been considered feminine. Chauncy's bold rhetorical move here is to sexualize that affiliation, and with it evangelical conversion, by punning on the word "common." To "make wives common" is both to share other men's wives and to render them cheap. From equating sudden conversion with enthusiasm, Chauncy has here moved to equating female enthusiasm with sexual license, thereby gaining a particularly strong hold over a population steeped in an ideology (if not practice) of chaste maidenhood.

Chauncy did not require the women who participated in the movement to actually be sexually promiscuous in order to see them has having been cheapened. All it really took was speaking out in church, like the "boisterous female speaker" he saw making a fool of herself at a Quaker meeting. According to Chauncy, the evangelical movement championed by Edwards brought the extreme practices of populist religions such as Quakerism into Congregational churches. Thus he condemned an increasingly common practice within the Great Awakening, namely

> the suffering, much more the encouraging WOMEN, yea, GIRLS, to speak in the assemblies for religious worship … 'Tis a plain case, these FEMALE EXHORTERS are condemned by the apostle; and if 'tis the *commandment of the* LORD, that they should not speak, they are *spiritual*only in their own tho'ts, while they attempt to do so.

In the above passage, as throughout Chauncy's diatribe, female religious experience is both disgusting in its own right and representative of the disorder and confusion of the entire "assembly." The wild countenances, loose tongues, "convulsions and distortions," and "freakish" conduct he observed may have looked particularly bad on women—but for that very reason, they served him well in communicating his disdain for men who would "set religion in such an ugly light by their unguarded conduct."

Why, given the prevalence of attitudes such as Chauncy's, did Edwards choose women as his representative converts when he wrote to defend the events taking place in Northampton against skeptics? Given Old Light Congregationalists' evident distaste for female "boisterousness," Edwards would seem only to have been adding fuel to the fire when he used Abigail Hutchinson, Phoebe Bartlett, and his own wife, Sarah Pierpont Edwards, as his exemplary converts. If women—whom Chauncy, following his own brand of biblical precedent, pronounced unfit even to speak in church—had every detail of their conversion published for a hungry public, surely the movement would be put at even greater risk of looking like public degeneracy to interested observers, from Boston to London.

Here again, as in his characterization of Northampton, Edwards anticipated such charges cleverly. Far from sluts and prostitutes, he characterized his converts as especially sensitive to contemporary assumptions that virtuous women would not seek fame. In fact, his converts detested unwelcome intrusion. Whether by preferring the country to the town, as did his teenage convert Hutchinson, or withdrawing to her private chamber before watching Christ take her heart and put it at his feet, as did his wife, Edwards' exemplary converts craved privacy, and allowed its violation only in the service of a higher truth. In sum, where opponents of the revival sexualized female participants, Edwards tried to desexualize them. He chose children; he chose women dying of frankly disgusting conditions; and, when writing about his wife, he omitted gender pronouns altogether.

Most of all, Edwards made sure to note the increasing physical discomfort that accompanied their approach to salvation. Like the girls in Le Roy, these eighteenth-century young women's "conversions" occasioned great bodily pain and displays of physical duress. "It has been very common," Edwards noted, "that the deep and fixed concern that has been on persons' minds, has had a painful influence on the bodies and given disturbance to animal nature." And yet these "disturbances" conveyed a message about human susceptibility to salvation that rendered such suffering redemptive.

Abigail Hutchinson's story can be summed up briefly. After beginning to focus on the question of her own salvation for the very human reason that she envied another young woman's greater religiosity, Abigail, already "long infirm of body," was taken up with a passionate thirst to meet her maker that made her agonizing death by starvation and dehydration, the result of a painful throat obstruction, a reputedly joyous event for both her and Edwards. Her early awakening sounds more like adolescent backbiting (or Facebook rivalries among Le Roy inhabitants trying to distinguish the truly sick from the fakers) than anything holy. When she heard about the conversion of another young woman of the town,

> This news wrought much upon her, and stirred up a spirit of envy in her towards this young woman, whom she thought very unworthy of being distinguished from others by such a mercy; but withal it engaged her in a firm resolution to do her utmost to obtain the same blessing.

In an instance of "be careful what you ask for," Abigail did indeed catch up with her undeserving peer, and it did indeed take her utmost. As "her illness increased upon her" and her body grew weaker, she felt her connection with God grow stronger. Suffering became a sign of salvation:

> Her illness in the latter part of it was seated much in her throat; and swelling inward, filled up the pipe so that she could swallow nothing but what was perfectly liquid, and but little of that, and

> with great and long strugglings and stranglings, that which she took in flying out at her nostrils till she at last could swallow nothing at all … Others were greatly moved to see what she underwent, and were filled with admiration at her unexampled patience.

It seems of particular significance that Abigail's throat, crucial not only to eating but also to speaking, became her illness's last stop before death. The quieter and more "patient" Abigail grew, the more her experience inspired others.

Edwards' narrative's other exemplar, Phoebe Bartlet, was also a woman of few words. Her inarticulacy owed not to illness, however, but rather extreme youth. Phoebe was four years old when she experienced conversion. Like Abigail's, it began in response to a social situation, this time "the talk of her brother." And like Abigail, she found it challenging to speak of her spiritual difficulties. Instead, as any four-year-old might, she threw something of a tantrum: "exceedingly crying, and wreathing her body to and fro, like one in anguish of spirit." At this point, as would any adult trying to coax sense out of a weeping child, her mother began to ask questions. Eventually, Phoebe answered "yes" to one about whether she loved God better than her family. But her chief form of expression remained the tear: she wept for her siblings as not being saved. In sum, like Abigail's, Phoebe's main medium of persuasion was her body—her tears proved the truth of her conversion.

For both Abigail and Phoebe, these intense but imprecise manifestations of spiritual torment not only highlighted a larger-than-life relationship with a divine entity who had no need for words, they also minimized the social components that had characterized the early stages of the conversion experience. Whether envying a neighbor or admiring a brother, both subjects of Edwards' account began their conversions firmly embedded in the context of their everyday lives. By the time Edwards was done with them, however, their only vital relationship was vertical (Abigail's more religious friend rapidly fades to insignificance). This lack of circumstantial context both made their conversion experiences easier to emulate and implicitly answered critics' charges that the malevolent influence of an unstable community led to such delusions.

The move from horizontal to vertical relationships became most pronounced in Edwards' account of his wife's conversion in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*. For Edwards, his wife, Sarah, seemed at times to represent Chauncy's own worst nightmare. Given Edwards' distaste for "enthusiasm," which he saw as a threat not only to individual salvation but also to the reputation of his community, it is not insignificant that he described Sarah as having once displayed an "*enthusiastic* disposition to follow impulses" (italics mine). Sarah did not always think much better of her husband, whom she described as capable of "ill will." What he called her "enthusiastic … impulses," she described as mere "conversation." In fact, her own spiritual autobiography

begins with her in a state of distress over Jonathan having told her “he thought I had failed in some measure in point of prudence, in some conversation I had with Mr. Williams … the day before.” Vexed because she and her husband had exchanged harsh words shortly before his departure, pacing the house alone with her anger and guilt, she found herself casting about for comfort, and it is here that her own account begins. The importance of her relationships with those around her is clear. Early in her account she referred to, among others, three ministers (whom she is attempting not to compare unfavorably with her husband); a neighbor; a favorite author; and “the negro servants in the town.” Clearly, Sarah was a highly articulate woman for whom social life was crucial, if not always satisfactory.

Reading Edwards’ rewriting of his wife’s autobiographical narrative for publication as “An Example of Evangelical Piety” in 1743’s *Some Thoughts*, one could be forgiven for thinking he was describing a second, meeker wife. Like Abigail and Phoebe, this Sarah favors unconscious bodily expression over verbal intent. She doesn’t talk so much as experience “high and extraordinary transport.” These transports tend toward the involuntary, as when they cause “the person (wholly unavoidably) to leap with … mighty exultation of soul.” And they are debilitating, as “bodily strength” is repeatedly “overcome.” With at least sixteen references to his subject’s bodily weakness in four pages, Edwards, as he had with Abigail and Phoebe, refocused attention away from the social interactions Sarah herself found so integral to her spiritual journey and onto the body laid low. This silenced corporeal entity allows him to represent her changing relationship with God as something both deeply private and broadly representative.

With bickering spouses, envious neighbors, and admiring little sisters put to rest, the world of Edwards’ female converts seemed to consist of souls purified by physical affliction. In his accounts, this affliction, while it often prevented legible speech, served as another kind of language. Sarah’s fainting body, Abigail’s obstructed airway, and Phoebe’s infantile tears became utterances that, precisely because of their inscrutability, spoke for God. As with the girls of Le Roy, then, physical suffering became a focal point for Edwards in order to establish meanings that had less to do with the pain itself than what that pain might represent. In countering Chauncy’s charges of sluttish self-abandonment among female converts, Edwards rendered his exemplary women nothing but air.

Charles Chauncy was probably never an easy man to like. One of the few existing biographies of him even has an index entry for “chief antagonists,” an entry that lists no fewer than twenty men. In any age, it is difficult to enjoy the company of someone so dedicated to hierarchy, order, and obedience. But the seemingly disproportionate rage Northampton’s conversion-fest inspired in him, while certainly an expression of his strict mindset, can also be seen as a response that many shared then—and still do today—to a historical phenomenon whose effects continue to unfold. For what Chauncy was witnessing with such horror was nothing less than the birth of celebrity: a new form of status that

could claim (and discard) the humble as well as the mighty—and, in its way, make the humble mighty.

Whether they were for it or against, the attention both men directed to the spiritual uprising of the 1730s and 40s, like the TV cameras in Le Roy, only intensified the phenomenon. As the battle between New and Old Light Congregationalists played itself out in pulpits and in print, the most flamboyant characters in the drama placed ever-greater demands on the public imagination. Child prodigies, saintly female martyrs, unstable agitators, and even suicidal extremists whose death presaged the end of Northampton's moment in the sun—all these individuals, whether honored or reviled, whether courting attention or buried before the fuss had even started, created more curiosity the more their stories became known. Whatever the true state of the converts themselves, international demand for news of their travails fixed to them a new kind of fame whose effects are still felt today.

What, we might ask, is our place in this business? It's easy to condemn a crab like Chauncy, or hover fascinated over Edwards' accounts of childhood wonder and teenage affliction. It is even easier to move from the *New York Times* to the *New Yorker*, respected bastions of journalistic excellence, in pursuit of more news about the events in Le Roy. But without what Joseph Roach calls our "probing fingers" and those of our colonial predecessors, none of these accounts would have had reason to exist in the first place, let alone thrive as they did. In essence, then, the reader herself becomes party to the debate over what, and how, ordinary women's extraordinary experience means. In the face of our own complicity, instead of resorting to a familiar indictment of patriarchal discourse over the course of almost three centuries, we need to attend to the appetites that make such struggles marketable. Why do we want to watch young women suffer? If the religious revivals of mid-eighteenth century America reveal celebrity culture's early outlines, the recent media frenzy over mysteriously afflicted schoolgirls suggests where this venerable American habit of mind may lead us, as mental aberration develops from an indicator of salvation or damnation to a holy state, or shameful blight, in its own right.

In her classic study *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag writes that "In the twentieth century, the repellent, harrowing disease that is made the index of a superior sensitivity, the vehicle of 'spiritual' feelings … is insanity." If we accept this claim, the links between the kind of attention paid to Abigail, Phoebe, and Sarah and that paid to Lydia Parker, Katie Krautwurst, Chelsey Dumars, and the other twitching girls of Le Roy become more evident. To understand this connection, we need to distinguish between how the families of Le Roy tended to think about what was happening and how consumers of national media such as *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *USA Today* and National Public Radio interpreted the story. Most Le Roy parents were so reluctant to accept doctors' prevailing diagnosis of a stress-related mental disorder that, once claims of environmental toxicity had been more or less ruled out, they flocked to a pediatric neurologist, Dr. Rosario Trifiletti, who was willing to diagnose a strep infection and walking pneumonia. Despite

inconsistencies such as the fact that, unlike any other form of strep or pneumonia, this one seemed to affect young women almost exclusively, and despite the scorn this diagnosis occasioned among other doctors, many girls began taking the antibiotics Trifiletti prescribed. These families preferred "hard" science, whether in the form of environmental contamination or bacterial infection, to the uncertainties and potential stigma of psychiatric diagnosis.

In other words, the patients and their families tended, at least at first, to experience a psychological diagnosis as a shameful blight to be resisted by whatever means necessary. This resistance can be explained in part by the role that stress was said to play in the disorder. Stress implies familial and social failings in a way that can often seem to assign blame. In the case of these young women, causes could have ranged from the widely shared economic decline of a formerly thriving town whose closed factories left a working-class community at the edge of poverty, to parental abuse and neglect, to high school status rivalry, to chronic illness and familial loss. Reluctance to accept "conversion disorder" also may have had a lot to do with the inadequacy of the diagnosis itself, which gave little clear indication of how exactly internalized conditions, from inherited genetic patterns to childhood experience to familial dysfunction, became contagious—that is, of how individual sets of symptoms became "mass psychogenic illness," which still does not have a specific listing in the *DSM*.

And yet while many residents of Le Roy remained skeptical and looked for more tangible explanations for the girls' behavior, the mostly middle-class national audiences who heard about, and reported, their situation in prestigious news outlets from *The Atlantic* to NPR tended to interpret this reluctance as delusional in its own right, often implicitly attributing it to the lesser education, or even the diminished interpretive capacity, of a socio-economic stratum beneath their own. Here, we cannot but be reminded of Chauncy's own disgust with rural townspeople who, lacking the metropolitan sophistication of his own congregation, fell for the charlatan antics of their leaders and their neighbors. The distinction is that, unlike Chauncy and his peers, today's middling orders don't feel comfortable condescending to those they consider beneath them.

Given this tension between pride and guilt, one reason that those far from Le Roy found conversion disorder—as opposed to a distant cousin of strep throat—by far the most satisfactory explanation of the Le Roy girls' malady is that, given what Sontag calls our current "romanticizing of madness," it raised these otherwise inconsequential individuals in the observers' estimation. There are sick girls everywhere, but a group of girls who share a mental illness is something else entirely. Nowhere is this clearer than in the photos that accompany the *New York Times* story, in which the mundane and the exceptional coexist uncomfortably. First, one notices the oppressive ordinariness of the surroundings. In a kitchen photo, bare walls (not counting a dry-erase board) and boxes of Lucky Charms and Froot Loops set the scene. In another, a popular girl's bedroom is painted in contrasting shades of pink. Polka-dot mugs, a

bottle of Nestlé Quik, and plastic tubs of cosmetics litter its faux-antique furniture scrolled with craft-store appliqué flowers. Above a propped-up, framed poster of a smiling Barack Obama (recalling the “I heart Black People” bumper sticker pegged to the yellow, peace-sign-stenciled wall of another photo), a small group photo proclaims “Memories” in large black type. In all the photos (four in total), each room is shot to appear as small and crowded as possible.

Enter the human subjects, larger than life. While Lydia is humbly dressed—sitting next to the Froot Loops, with smudged eyeliner and French-manicured nails, she wears a terry-cloth bathrobe in the same pink as the cereal box—she is ennobled by the contusions that ring her eyes and darken her chin. At least one bruise, we are informed in the caption, happened “when an uncontrollable tic caused her to hit herself with her cellphone.” Something about the ordinariness of the cellphone in contrast with the extremity of the violence it caused raises her even further above her surroundings. From the wreckage of what to many sophisticated readers would seem an almost intolerably boring life, Lydia has become—well, interesting. Tragic, even. And a peer, with the direct gaze and solemn bearing of one who has endured perhaps more than the viewer can imagine. Katie, she of the cluttered pink bedroom, also almost shames us with her sad sideways gaze, her bravely mismatched socks poking out from under torn jeans. Pink as it is, her room only highlights its occupant’s absolute lack of girlish cheer. Finally, as single mom Chelsey stands by a rusted bridge over a brush-littered stream, holding an obliviously cute baby bundled in purple hearts, her black jacket, compressed lips and, again, direct stare dare us to read her as anything less than a Madonna.

In 1737, to accuse young women of a mental illness such as “enthusiasm” was to shame them, while to render their religious conversion in convincing terms was to raise them above the town, the colonies, and even the print culture that, in calling attention to their controversial condition, enshrined them in the public eye. In 2012, by contrast, a well-intentioned diagnosis out of the *DSM-IV* was meant to relieve concern by providing a coherent, if rather amorphous, account of a seemingly inexplicable phenomenon—and yet it had a not dissimilar effect to its predecessor. On the one hand, it wreaked havoc among suffering individuals whose attempts to deny their diagnosis only prolonged their anxiety and forestalled adequate treatment. On the other, it made stars out of ordinary women, whose “superior sensitivity” raised them above their generally dismissive readers. This ennobling did not help the patients much—in fact, more attention meant more stress, which meant an intensification of symptoms. But it did help readers work through their own class anxieties by finding common ground with individuals who previously had been as indistinguishable as their cereal boxes. And, as formerly unknown young women came to seem more and more like the reader in their vulnerability and tenacity, initially voyeuristic strangers found a mirror in which to consider the unnerving fact that minds—theirs included—might not always do right by their bodies.

Over the course of almost three centuries, the concerns have changed. We now

seem to worry more about our current circumstances than our future estate. But the mechanism for exploring our inchoate anxieties through the vehicle of anonymous young women in the grip of an unnamed affliction remains nearly identical. Today, "conversion disorder" demands the respect that "conversion" itself did two centuries prior. For some reason, we now bestow our collective favor on those who suffer delusion, whereas two centuries ago, we saved it for those who knew a truth that others could only imagine. In this sense, the young women of Northampton and Le Roy are worlds, as well as centuries, apart. And yet the conditions they must satisfy to gain our undivided attention remain both similar and similarly cruel. Groups of young women seem to attract special notice when they are joined in a common affliction whose signal characteristic is that it speaks through the body, rendering verbal coherence erratic at best and irrelevant at worst. We continue to believe that actions speak louder than words (especially words that might come from young women). The difficulty is that some actions hurt more than others. Some actions pose no tangible benefit to the actor, and yet repeat themselves unaccountably. And it would seem that these are the behaviors most worthy of notice when it comes to groups of otherwise unexceptional young women. Thus do cultural debates of the moment, whether about the nature of proper religious observance or the mind's capacity to unravel the body, make ordinary young women temporarily famous for something over which they have no say.

Further Reading

For a collection of the sermons and other writing from Jonathan Edwards' experience in Northampton, see Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen, vol. 4 in "The Works of Jonathan Edwards" (New Haven, Conn., 1972). Many of the details of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards' spiritual lives can be found in Sereno Dwight, ed., *The Works of President Edwards: With a Memoir of His Life in Ten Volumes*, Volume 1 (New York, 1830). The reputation of Jonathan Edwards' nemesis, Charles Chauncy, has suffered by comparison, with versions of his sermons harder to find. A sensitive biography of Chauncy is Edward Griffin, *Old Brick: Charles Chauncy of Boston, 1705-1787* (Minneapolis, 1980).

A useful examination of the phenomenon of religious enthusiasm in young women in early America—and of the lessons that the culture drew from such manifestations—is Ann Taves, ed. *Religion and Domestic Violence in Early New England: The Memoirs of Abigail Abbot Bailey* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989). For an excellent discussion of the significance of emotion—including emotional religion—in eighteenth-century America, see Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2008). For a recent meditation on the phenomenon of celebrity, see Joseph Roach, "The Doubting-Thomas Effect," *PMLA* (October 2011).

The mysterious group illness of the girls in Le Roy, N.Y., in 2011-12 generated coverage across a wide range of media outlets. Some of the more notable pieces to address the phenomenon include Nicholas Jackson, "It Could Just Be Stress: The Teens of Le Roy and Conversion Disorder" (*The Atlantic*, February 5, 2012);

Susan Dominus "What Happened to the Girls in Le Roy," *The New York Times Magazine* (March 11, 2012); and Emily Eakin, "Le Roy Postcard: Hysterical," *The New Yorker* (March 5, 2012).

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