

Our Antinomians, Ourselves: Or, Anne Hutchinson's Monstrous Birth & The Pathologies of Obstetrics



Generally speaking, the *New England Journal of Medicine* is not a publication of much interest for scholars of early America. However, scholars of the Antinomian Controversy occasionally cite a 1959 article titled "[New England's First Recorded Hydatidiform Mole](#)" (note: fee required to access full article). This article—or note, more precisely—offers a medical diagnosis for the "monstrous birth" alleged to have issued from Anne Hutchinson. "Monstrous birth" was the name Hutchinson's opponents gave to the miscarriage she suffered shortly after she was expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the wake of what scholars term the Antinomian Controversy, a collection of religious, political, and social conflicts in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s. The religious valences of the conflict can seem to modern readers to revolve around relatively abstruse theological questions, but the social and political stakes are clearer. Shortly after her arrival in Boston, Hutchinson began leading a lay discussion of that day's sermon, which quickly attracted a large following. Evidently, the popularity of this lay group threatened some of the ministers and magistrates of the Bay Colony theocracy, and Hutchinson found herself accused of various heresies. After a civil and ecclesiastical trial, Hutchinson, and some of her followers—termed "Antinomians" because of their insistence on the primacy of grace over works—were banished. Hutchinson settled in Rhode Island, where she miscarried, and later departed for present-day Westchester County, New York, where she and her family were massacred by Indians.

"New England's First Recorded Hydatidiform Mole" allows its authors, writing in a scientific age, to offer a scientific explanation for what Hutchinson's antagonists called "30 monstrous births or thereabouts, at once; some of them bigger, some lesser ... few of any perfect shape, not at all of them, (as farre as I could evern learne) of humane shape." In the *New England Journal of Medicine*, we can see science displace fear and superstition as explanations for Anne Hutchinson's miscarriage. In the historiography of the Antinomian Controversy, this article offers a name and an explanation we can use in place

of the slanderous maledictions of Hutchinson's enemies. As scholars, we are moved to exclaim "what a difference an Enlightenment makes" or words to that effect.

And yet. My interest in the historiography of Anne Hutchinson led me to track down the article, and what I found was less informative, but more interesting, than I might have hoped. The NEJM does take Hutchinson's miscarriage out of the realm of divine judgment, and into the realm of medical science, but reading a 1959 article about a 1639 miscarriage in 2011 reveals how little the discourse about women's bodies evolves over 320 years. The subject of the NEJM article is Anne Hutchinson, or more precisely, a growth inside of Anne Hutchinson. Briefly reviewing the antagonism between Hutchinson and Bay Colony Governor John Winthrop may help explain why he was so keen to investigate and publicize Hutchinson's obstetrical woes.

Anne Hutchinson is the most prominent figure in a theological dispute that erupted in the newly settled Massachusetts Bay Colony in the late 1630s. In the summer of 1634, Anne Hutchinson and her family arrived in Boston from England, having followed the famous Puritan minister John Cotton from Lincolnshire. At some point in the next two years, Anne Hutchinson began to hold meetings in her house to discuss the previous week's sermons. The only records of these gatherings come from Hutchinson's opponents. Initially, they attracted a small circle of predominately female friends, but over time they grew and came to include more men. As these discussions grew in popularity, Hutchinson evidently took more liberties in her analyses, and identified shortcomings in the theology of the Bay Colony ministers who were not Cotton, in terms of the respective relation of justification and sanctification in the process of an individual's salvation. The distinction between these terms constitute a whole field of Christian apologetics unto themselves, but basically, justification is the manifestation of God's grace in the heart of a sinner, while sanctification is living a life that shows evidence of God's grace. As Calvinists, the orthodox ministers of the Bay Colony believed in the inherent wicked and sinful nature of each human being. These wretched souls could be saved only by a free gift of God's grace, according to Calvinist doctrine. At the same time, there was nothing an individual could do to deserve to be saved, because of his or her inherently wicked nature.

To a contemporary audience, these may seem like technical quibbles on the road to heaven, but the inference Hutchinson and her followers drew was that many of the Bay Colony's ministers preached a covenant of works, against the Calvinist orthodoxy of a covenant of grace. One way to interpret Hutchinson's teaching is that she was claiming the vast majority of Bay Colony clergy were preaching a false doctrine. To staunch the flow of heresy, in October 1636, Bay Colony ministers convened a "conference in private" with Hutchinson, Cotton, and John Wheelwright, Hutchinson's brother-in-law. This meeting served to address Hutchinson's unorthodox ideas, but also to consider if John Cotton was their source. The ministers were able to settle these questions, but parishioners of the Boston church loyal to Hutchinson proposed that Wheelwright take the place

of John Wilson, a Hutchinson opponent, as the second minister of the Boston church. Winthrop resolved this confrontation in favor of Wilson, but it led to a second meeting of ministers with Cotton and Hutchinson. In the meantime, on December 7, Hutchinson sympathizer Henry Vane resigned as governor, and then withdrew his resignation, but returned to England.

The next gubernatorial election, on May 17, 1637, was moved to Newtown (Cambridge) in an effort to temper the influence of Hutchinson's followers over the proceedings. This effort was successful, and Winthrop carried the election. After this attempt to address the civil threat posed by Hutchinson's followers, called Antinomians by their opponents, the Bay Colony clergy convened a synod, beginning on August 30. Tensions continued, and on November 2 the General Court voted to disenfranchise and banish the leaders of the Antinomian party, and to impose lesser penalties on the other colonists who had signed a petition in favor of Wheelwright. Hutchinson's civil and ecclesiastical trials followed, which culminated in her excommunication on March 22, 1638.

Hutchinson, her family, and some of her followers, both legal and voluntary exiles, followed her south to Aquidneck, or the Island of Rhode Island, where they settled the town of Portsmouth. After settling in Portsmouth, Hutchinson found herself pregnant for the sixteenth time, an unusual but not exceptional situation for a woman in colonial New England. At some point in 1639, she miscarried. Rather than a recognizable fetus, she delivered an indistinct mass of some 30 globules. Word of this misfortune reached John Winthrop, who wrote to request details. John Clarke, a physician of Rhode Island, obliged. His report was transcribed in Winthrop's journal:

"I beheld ... several lumps, every one of them greatly confused ... without form ... not much unlike the swims of some fish." Following up in search of more information, the governor learns that "The lumps were twenty-six or twenty-seven, distinct and not joined together; there were no secundine after them; six of them were as great as his fist, and one as great as two fists, rest each less than the other, and the smallest about the bigness of the top of his thumb. The globes were round things, included in the lumps, about the bigness of a small Indian Bean, and like the pearl in a man's eye. The two lumps, which differed from the rest, were like liver or congealed blood, and had no small globes in them, as the rest had."

This is rather more information than it might today seem appropriate for a doctor to disclose about a subject he has examined, especially to one of his patient's chief political antagonists. It is also worth noting that Winthrop recorded it in his journal, which was a quasipublic document. But Winthrop was not done. In 1644, Winthrop wrote *Short Story of the Rise, Reign, and Ruine of the Antinomians, Familists, and Libertines* in an effort to assure Londoners who were concerned that the colony and its independent Congregational, rather than Presbyterian, churches, were fostering a nursery of error. As part of this narrative, Winthrop relates, "Then God was pleased to step in with his casting voice, and bring his owne vote and suffrage from heaven, by testifying his

displeasure against their opinions and practices, as clearely as if he had pointed with his finger, in causing the two fomenting women in the time of the height of the Opinions to produce out of their wombs, as before they had out of their braines, such monstrous births as no Chronicle (I thinke) hardly ever recorded the like ...” (Mary Dyer, Hutchinson’s supporter, also miscarried a badly malformed fetus, also described by Winthrop in detail.) “Mistriss Hutchinson, being big with child, and growing towards the time of her labour... she brought forth not one... but (which was more strange to amazement) 30 monstrous births or thereabouts, at once; some of them bigger, some lesser, some of one shape, some of another; few of any perfect shape, none at all of them (as farre as I could ever learne) of humane shape.”



A forty-six-year-old woman suffers a miscarriage of her sixteenth pregnancy. Sad and unfortunate, but not remarkable. It is hard to imagine it being worth inquiring from Boston to Portsmouth for details, let alone recording these details in a public place, and publishing these details in London. The pathology that seems salient here is the pathology in the minds of the men who were so keen to exchange and publicize details of this event, rather than the pathology of a weary woman’s body. The key to understanding Winthrop’s interest in a middle-aged woman’s obstetrical travails lies in his providential understanding of the world—the cringe-inducing details are unpleasant to read, but politically, the salient portion of the passage lies in Winthrop’s insistence that God was “testifying his displeasure against their opinions and practices, as clearely as if he had pointed with his finger.”

This willingness to take political advantage by publicizing an adversary’s miscarriage as evidence of God’s will, we might imagine, is a function of a long-ago and unenlightened time. However, Anne Hutchinson arrives in contemporary medical discourse in a way that is not appreciably different from Winthrop’s treatment of her. In 1959, Margaret V. Richardson, B.A., M.T., and Arthur T. Hertig, M.D., published a brief article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, titled “New England’s First Recorded Hydatidiform Mole.” This article by the senior research assistant, and the Shattuck Professor of Pathological Anatomy, of the Department of Pathology, at Harvard Medical School analyzes the various descriptions of Hutchinson’s travail, and determines that she suffered from a hydatidiform mole, a condition where a fertilized embryo does not develop, but instead becomes a mass of placental tissue, like a bunch of grapes in its form. Richardson and Hertig conclude the article with a long quotation from Winthrop’s journal, where he transcribes the account of the Rhode Island physician who examined Hutchinson.

The NEJM article offers an account of the pathology that afflicted Hutchinson's pregnancy, but not the pathology that pervades the discourse surrounding it. It is a short piece, subtitled "A Historical Note." The first three paragraphs offer an overview of the literature on hydatidiform moles, dating back to the third century B.C. An F. Mauriceau, writing in 1664, represents the closest contemporary to Hutchinson, and "considered the main factor for molar formation to be too frequent coitus." Richardson and Hertig then cite more recent scholarship, including Hertig's own entry on the hydatidiform mole in the *Atlas of Tumor Pathology* from 1956.

Richardson and Hertig learn of Hutchinson's case from an unusual source: "The present case, that of Anne Hutchinson, was mentioned in the book *The Winthrop Woman* by Anya Seton." Seton was a popular writer of historical novels, and in this one, she turns her hand to colonial New England, telling the story of John Winthrop's niece. Seton was popular in her day—this novel was the eighth-best-selling novel of 1958—behind *Dr. Zhivago* and *Lolita*, as it happened. Thus, it seems likely that Hertig, or Richardson, or an associate, came across the account of Hutchinson's travail, and decided to do some ex post facto pathologizing. The authors conclude that "It is our belief that this was the first hydatidiform mole to be recorded in New England." This sentence offers a peculiar intersection of chronology, geography, and pathology. This is the *New England* journal of medicine, but the relevance of this particular geographic scope is hard to understand. Moreover, firstness seems interesting and relevant when documenting instances of human achievement—the first school, or hospital, or synagogue in a given region seem worth commemorating, but the first New England instance of a complaint that was familiar in Europe? Attaching significance to Hutchinson's condition in these terms suggests a preoccupation with firstness—and New Englandness—that extends well beyond this article. It is hard to travel very far in New England, or in New England historiography, without encountering a reference to the first or the oldest of something—iron works, printing press, university. There does, however, seem to be a difference between monuments of human achievement like these, and the case of the first instance of a specific uterine tumor identified in New England.

Surprisingly, Richardson and Hertig leave the pathologizing to their seventeenth-century investigators. The rest of the article offers a brief sketch of Hutchinson's life, then excerpts Cotton's stated belief that "a mole was 'several lumps of a man's seed, without any alteration or mixture of any thing from the woman'." The article concludes by describing Winthrop's zeal to know more, and ends by quoting Clarke at great length, and without comment, as he describes the sizes and shapes of the various components of the mole.

The pathology of this pathologizing of Anne Hutchinson, I argue, is as present in 1959 as it is in 1644. Boston was, in many ways, a more tolerant place in 1959 than it was three centuries previously. However, these representatives of a leading medical school—affiliated, as it happens, with a college founded to produce the ministers needed to combat the errors issuing forth from the likes of Hutchinson—publishing in a prestigious journal, do little more than

perpetuate the grotesque lack of regard for Hutchinson's privacy by failing to consider how we know what we know about her.

A diagnosis, a name for the illness of what the article calls "the case," creates the sense that with this diagnosis, Hutchinson's case is closed. In this respect "God's casting voice" and "hydatidiform mole" are structurally equivalent in their function as names for a symptom. The larger question of why Hutchinson's political opponents were allowed to examine the contents of her womb, and why they wanted to, remain unasked. In failing to ask these questions, this article perpetuates the notion that women really speak when their bodies yield up evidence to an examining physician.

Reading a document like "New England's first recorded Hydatidiform Mole" points to divergent ways one can read such a text. It is history, in the literal sense that it provides information about the past. Developments in medicine between the 1640s and 1950s permit us to give a name, a diagnosis to Hutchinson's misfortune, taking it out of the realm of divine judgments, and into the realm of science. Rather than note the approximate homology between the number of lumps her body produced, and the number of errors her brain produced, we can call this a "hydatidiform mole," and look it up in the *Atlas of Tumor Pathology*. We have, in this respect, come a long way, baby.

But we can also read an article like this as a historical document in itself, as a marker of the lack of progress in Boston between 1643 and 1959. It's not hard to find scholars who have commented on the creepy and callous nature of the Bay Colony's leaders' interest in the Hutchinson and Dyer monstrous births. But it is worth noting that a prestigious, peer-reviewed journal could print an article in 1959 that shares Winthrop and Clarke's total indifference to the humanity of the owner of the womb it discusses.

It may be perverse, or self serving, for a scholar of the humanities to read an article in a scientific journal and insist on a more humane approach. There is potential heuristic value in post-facto diagnoses, and fields like forensic anthropology address these kinds of questions with this kind of evidence regularly. Nevertheless I do think there is some benefit to considering the case of Winthrop and Clarke and the case of Richardson and Hertig together. We recognize the chilling detachment of Winthrop's account, the delight he took in making political propaganda from it, and the lack of regard for the humanity of his antagonist. However, that same lack of regard is as present in 1959 as it was in the 1630s and 1640s. Richardson and Hertig consider the firstness and even the New Englandness of the growths within Hutchinson's body, but not the body that contained these growths. The sum of the progress in the discourse about Anne Hutchinson from the 1630s to the 1950s is essentially a change of name from "monstrous birth" to "hydatidiform mole." Either we have come a very long way since 1959, or we have not, in fact, come as far as we would like to think.

Three hundred and sixty-six years separate us from Hutchinson's life.

Enlightenment virtues like empirical observation and the scientific method emerged in the interval. Hutchinson lived in an early modern world; we live in a postmodern one. Moving forward from Hutchinson's time to our own, we were 86 percent of the way to the present day when Richardson and Hertig wrote their article. The treatment that Hutchinson suffered is unimaginable today. It is (one hopes at least) hard to imagine a sitting governor prodding an associate in a neighboring state for details of a political opponent's miscarriage, then publicizing the results for propaganda purposes. And yet it's hard to shake the sense that we have not entirely escaped a culture where what really matters about women is the matter that comes out of their vaginas, rather than the words that come out of their mouths.

Further reading:

I had the opportunity to present a version of this article at the History of Women's Health Conference at Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia, in 2009. I am grateful to conference organizer Stacey Peeples and to the conference attendees for their questions.

This article is part of my ongoing interest in the history of the historiography of Anne Hutchinson's life, and part of a book project still in its early stages titled *Antinomian Idol: Anne Hutchinson and American History*. I lay out a statement of my approach in "The Antinomian Controversy Did Not Take Place," *Early American Studies* 6.2 (2008). My interest in Hutchinson is in the persistent and enduring interest her story has held for generations of writers, from John Winthrop to the present. Her story is compelling, but relatively light on detail, and provides a narrative that is malleable enough to be reworked in any number of forms—she is variously figured as a proto-Quaker, a proto-Transcendentalist, and a proto-feminist, to name only a few. Engaging with the mutability of Hutchinson's story, I will develop a literary analysis of this body of historiography, with the broader goal of offering some insights about how we write about the past. As such, this forthcoming book will be the full-length version of the bibliographical essay accompanying *Common-Place* articles, but in the meantime, here are a few salient texts:

We can start with David Hall's *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Durham, N.C., 1990). David Hall has done more for Hutchinson scholarship than anyone since John Winthrop. I strongly suspect that his effort to put many of the salient documents of the Antinomian Controversy in such accessible form has shaped the field of early American studies by making work on this topic easier to pursue than others—it is hard to find a monograph on early New England published since Hall's collection that does not include an Antinomian Controversy chapter. I am debating whether it is overstating the case to call this the "Hall Effect."

Eve LaPlante's *American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman Who Defied the Puritans* (New York, 2004) is written for a general audience. It suffers a bit from the kind of ancestor worship that characterized

an older generation of New England historiography, but is a decent introduction to Hutchinson's story.

Readers specifically interested in the obstetrical dimensions of the story should consult Anne Jacobson Schutte's "'Such Monstrous Births': A Neglected Aspect of the Antinomian Controversy" *Renaissance Quarterly*, 38.1 (Spring, 1985): 85-106. It does an excellent job of putting Hutchinson's alleged experience in the broader cultural context of early modern scientific thought.

Readers interested in the theological dimensions of the controversy will profit from Michael P. Winship's *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton, 2002), a serious effort to engage with the controversy on its own terms. A companion text is Winship's *The Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided* (Lawrence, Kansas, 2005), which considers the legal case against Anne Hutchinson.

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