

Go on—Have a Good Cry

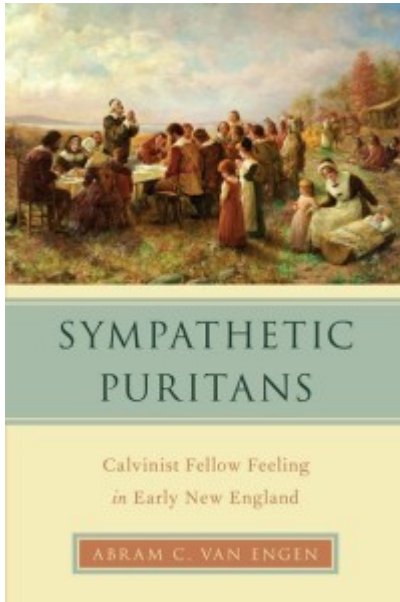


SYMPATHETIC PURITANS

Calvinist Fellow Feeling
in Early New England

ABRAM C. VAN ENGEN

Sympathetic Puritans is a refreshingly ambitious book. Van Engen writes in lucid prose what might best be described as a corrective prequel to the foundational work of Ann Douglas, whose *Feminization of American Culture* remains essential reading for students of nineteenth-century literature and culture. Although Van Engen grounds his social history of Calvinist theology firmly in the soil of seventeenth-century Massachusetts, his discussion of sympathy and sentiment often veers further afield; he seems equally comfortable reading the *Amicitia* of Desiderius Erasmus, the *Narrative* of Mary Rowlandson, and *The Scarlet Letter* of Nathaniel Hawthorne. A wide-ranging and polished study of colonial life and letters, *Sympathetic Puritans* sheds new light on the all too human motives of men and women alternately revered and demonized in popular history.



Abram C. Van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 328 pp., \$74.

John Winthrop's call for the inhabitants of Puritan Boston to be more charitable, becoming as a "Citty vpon a Hill," continues to shape the rhetoric of American politics, but his banishment of Anne Hutchinson has also led some to brand him the intolerant leader of an oppressive patriarchal government. Notwithstanding this apparently unfeeling treatment of Hutchinson, Van Engen insists that Winthrop's emphasis on mutual affections was sincere, because "being intolerant is not necessarily the same as lacking sympathy. In fact, valuing sympathy and valuing tolerance might bear little relation to one another—a point worth emphasizing since a good deal of modern pluralism seems to conflate them" (23). The sympathy and Christian charity extolled by Winthrop was grounded in the ancient principle "like rejoices in like" (*simile gaudet simili*), and so the key question for members of Massachusetts Bay congregations was, "With whom do I fellow feel?" or "With whom do I sympathize?" Love for Jesus Christ and for the godly members of his visible church might have provided colonists with a comforting assurance of their own spiritual rectitude; on the other hand, sympathy for a heretic like Hutchinson or for the "merciless Heathen" of Rowlandson's *Narrative* might have suggested that an individual is unrepentant and flirting with damnation. The Calvinist fellow feeling of Puritan Massachusetts was a double-edged sword that encouraged—but also circumscribed—compassion.

The meaning of a sympathetic identification with other church members, Van Engen argues, was at the heart of the antinomian or free grace controversy. Winthrop and Thomas Shepard characterized a love of the brethren as a sign of conversion, while John Cotton, Henry Vane, and Hutchinson contended that only a personal experience of Christ's grace could assure one of salvation. "In other words," Van Engen writes, the dispute "was not, as many scholars have asserted, a battle between the moral and the spiritual, between disciplined obedience and religious experience. Instead, the Antinomian Controversy divided Puritans over

the meaning and value of sympathy itself" (59-60). Because Winthrop and Shepard prevailed in this theological power struggle, the Calvinists of Massachusetts Bay increasingly prioritized sympathy, and its signs, as a leading indicator of the colony's collective standing before God.

Puritan colonists and Native peoples seeking to join their congregations both demonstrated and elicited appropriate forms of sympathy through the performance of affection. The sincere conversion of Praying Indians taught by John Eliot was manifest in tears shed privately; thus, as Van Engen explains,

Eliot's brother informed John Wilson that "he had purposefully sometimes in the darke walked the Round, as it were alone, and found [Indians] in their severall Families as devout in prayer, etc. as if there had been any present to observe." Such modes of surveillance validated public expressions of affection by tracking them back to private lives (156).

Just as Algonquin converts wept to demonstrate the sincerity of their sympathy with Puritan colonists, so too the colonists wept to demonstrate their participation in a transatlantic communion of the saints. In a 1640 sermon titled *New Englands Teares, for Old Englands Feares*, Taunton minister William Hooke pled with his congregants to identify with and weep for the afflictions of Puritans suffering in the English Civil War. Lachrymose cheeks were important signs of Puritan piety and ecclesiastical solidarity.

Of course, as Van Engen notes, tears also signified true religion in the sentimental novels of nineteenth-century American literature, and he repeatedly draws connections between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries to suggest that the distance between Calvinism and sentimentalism is narrower than Douglas would have us believe. For instance, in his discussion of Hooke, Van Engen writes that the minister's plea "does not seem all that different from the rhetorical use of sympathy in later American sentimental fiction. As Glenn Hendler explains, the nineteenth-century reader was called not just to feel *like* certain characters, but to feel *with* them" (127). Van Engen is right to draw these connections between the fellow feeling cultivated in both Calvinist sermons and sentimental novels. *Sympathetic Puritans* "helps us reimagine seventeenth-century New England," and after reading Van Engen's iconoclastic work, it is difficult to remember why New England Calvinists are so often caricatured as cold and unfeeling (221). Turning that entrenched stereotype on its head may, in the end, be Van Engen's greatest accomplishment.

The parallels between Puritan letters and sentimental literature are clearly delineated, compelling, and provocative, but the nature of the relationship between these two literary movements remains frustratingly vague. Van Engen's language is that of anticipation: "Long before sentimental literature, [Edward] Johnson's departure scene exemplifies what Marianne Noble calls 'the classic paradox of sentimentalism'" (140); "The process of stirring up sympathy, moreover, could lead Puritans to literary strategies that look in many ways like precursors of sentimentalism" (143); and "Part of what [Rowlandson's

narrative] anticipated, I argue, was sentimental literature” (176). The closest he comes to asserting a direct, causal relation between Calvinist theology and sentimental literature is a reminder that Puritans “used literary forms that would later be found at the heart of sentimental novels. Any one of these techniques by itself would suggest little, but taken together they reveal how Calvinist notions of sympathy—and its rhetorical and theological consequences—could lay groundwork for sentimental techniques” (169). What is missing from *Sympathetic Puritans* is an elaboration on that word *could*, a sense of precisely how to move from Van Engen’s foundational work on seventeenth-century Calvinism to a nineteenth-century sentimental superstructure.

Van Engen’s work is groundbreaking, a must-read for scholars of New England Puritanism and sentimental novels alike. But it also cautiously skirts ground yet unbroken, particularly in the eighteenth century and the pivotal transition from literary forms anticipating sentimentalism to sentimentalism itself. At the end of *Sympathetic Puritans*, I found myself wanting to ask Van Engen what he made of Jonathan Edwards on *Religious Affections* (1754) and the transatlantic sympathies stirred by the Great Awakening, whether he saw traces of a specifically Calvinist sympathy in Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791) or in the responses of Rowson’s North American readers. But that, I suppose, is the highest compliment to be paid any book—that it leaves you eager for a sequel.

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