

Joanna Cotton: An Unexpected (Proto-) Egalitarian

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In 1664, a young Puritan minister named John Cotton Jr. was found guilty of “lascivious unclean practices with three women.”¹ Mr. Cotton was a Harvard graduate, a descendant of well-respected parents, and a husband and father. As a punishment for his sinful deeds, English officials in Massachusetts forced Cotton to give up his pastorate of a local church. The question was, what could he do to support Joanna, his wife, and their children? Puritan leaders found the answer in an unlikely place: Martha’s Vineyard. For many years, members of the Mayhew family had labored as missionaries on the island, trying to teach local Indians about Christianity. The Mayhews needed help, and John Cotton Jr. was sufficiently qualified, in the eyes of the English at least, to preach to Indians. So, in 1666, John Cotton Jr. began a long missionary career on both Martha’s Vineyard and in the town of Plymouth. In many respects, his legacy lasted beyond his death, for his two sons, Josiah and Roland Cotton, preached to Indians in Massachusetts long after their father was gone.²

Other scholarly works have examined male members of the Cotton family and how they interacted with Native Americans.³ In this article, however, I wish to explore the experiences of Joanna Cotton, a wife and mother of missionaries in colonial America. In particular, I will explore the extent to which Joanna fell in line with expectations regarding gender roles in colonial New England. These roles typically involved a degree of female subordination to males.

Supposedly, New England Puritans carefully adhered to interpretations of Scripture that restricted women’s roles. For example, one Puritan minister wrote that women could not teach men about the Bible, “for this the Apostle accounteth an act of authority, which is unlawful for a woman to usurpe over the man.”⁴ Other ministers spoke regularly about husbands being the leaders of households and about the dangers of assertive women. Such statements by male Puritan leaders imply that Puritan women were relegated to the private sphere of home life while men pursued business and political opportunities in the public sphere of society.⁵

While Puritan ministers in colonial New England called for the strict regulation of women’s behavior, especially in regard to religious leadership, it is legitimate to investigate the extent to which actual Puritan families lived out these expressed ideals. Joanna Cotton’s life suggests that she, to a certain extent, actually lived out egalitarian principles. She certainly did not adhere perfectly to the restrictive ideals expressed by some Puritans of the colonial period. Like many evangelical spouses in the United States today who claim to follow rigid gender norms, John and Joanna were in fact unwilling, and perhaps unable, to adhere to a strict list of rules regarding the “proper” roles of men and women.⁶ The dynamics of everyday life, along with Joanna’s ambitious tendencies and intellectual giftings, led this Puritan couple to embrace a degree of egalitarianism in their relationship. Thus, her life, somewhat like the lives of other evangelical families living in the United States today, reveals the untenable nature of

strict gender norms and precise restrictions upon women’s leadership opportunities.

One of the ways in which Joanna Cotton escaped subordination to the men in her life was by developing her own distinctive Christian faith. Sufficient documentation exists to support certain conclusions regarding her religious beliefs, household duties, and emotional state. This article, in examining these aspects of her life, argues that Joanna’s beliefs and behavior often differed substantially from those of her husband. She regularly functioned at the edges of what some scholars describe as a “culture of wonders” that pervaded popular religious expression in colonial New England.⁷ Though she was far from a heretic, Joanna worked as a healer and paid particular attention to “providences,” dreams, and other supernatural phenomena. This was true even as her husband and adult son were more strictly inclined to follow reason and theology rooted in written texts, such as the Bible.

In addition to developing her own form of independent spirituality, Joanna maintained a degree of autonomy and power in other areas of life. In spite of technical prohibitions against women teaching men, Joanna regularly provided scriptural and religious instruction to adult males. Some of this had to do with the fact that her husband was often away from home for extended periods of time. Scholars who have studied women’s experiences in colonial Massachusetts have found that the nature of a husband’s career often had profound implications for wives. For example, the wives of ship captains, sailors, and other itinerant workers often held a leadership role in their families. Historians have used the term “deputy husband” to refer to such women. These wives directed children and servants, bought and sold goods, and took charge of the household while their husbands were away from home on business.⁸ My research shows that Joanna Cotton, being the wife of a missionary, also had numerous opportunities to take over leadership of her family while her husband was away from home. During John’s many voyages to Indian communities, Joanna would be described by historians as a “deputy husband.”

Joanna’s individualized spirituality

Joanna Cotton’s spirituality was quite different than that of her husband and sons. The evidence indicates that her faith was more mystical than that of her husband, John, or her son Josiah. John, Josiah, and the other men of the family believed firmly that the Bible was a container of God’s holy truth. It was a completely sufficient source of guidance and inspiration for righteous living. The men in the Cotton family viewed other potential sources

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of revelation, such as dreams or visions, suspiciously. They also were skeptical of reports of so-called miracles or healings. They felt that such supernatural interventions were a part of the apostolic age of the New Testament, but not a part of English life in the 1600s. Joanna, unlike the men of the family, was more receptive to dreams and had a more open attitude toward the miraculous. Relatively speaking, her religious system was more dynamic, animated, and mystical than that of her husband and sons. It is worth mentioning that, in colonial New England, both men and women had beliefs similar to Joanna's. Her drift toward mysticism was not an exclusively female trait; it just so happened that, in her family circle, she was the one who adhered to popular religious traditions while her husband and sons had beliefs common among elites.⁹

When writing letters to her sons, Joanna referred repeatedly to miracles God had performed. In one letter to Josiah, she listed ten dramatic "mercies" God had shown him when he was a young boy. She described the miraculous healing of her infant son's lame leg, his healing from a bout of blindness, three deliverances from drowning, and protection when a cart full of wood rolled over her son's thigh. She further mentioned numerous times when Josiah survived outbreaks of disease that took the lives of other children who lived nearby. She then used these experiences and memories to warn Josiah, saying, "God has waited on you; turn to him now, lest when he come again with another sickness or danger, he will not spare you and then what will become of you my dear child?"¹⁰ Her hope was that such examples would motivate Josiah to avoid sinful behavior and pride during his teenage years, a time when Puritans believed that people were particularly prone to falling away from the Christian faith.¹¹ Joanna's letter shows how much she emphasized the importance of miraculous deliverances, healings, and other acts of God to her son.

The fact that Joanna highly valued memories of supernatural experiences is shown in a later letter she wrote to Josiah. Again, she warned her son to avoid sin and to seek God. She added the following advice, however: "My child, don't throw this letter away, but read it and that which has all your deliverances from death. Read them often and pray over them and leave not your heart until you find a change wrought."¹² By urging her son to reread and meditate upon these texts, she ascribed to them a high degree of spiritual significance. In her mind, reason and biblical exegesis could be supplemented with other stories and examples from Josiah's own life, all to prevent him from falling into a life of sin.

In a letter to his son, John Cotton Jr. made clear the contrast between his Scripture-focused world and Joanna's dynamic mysticism. John told his son that "The night after the fast, your mother, whose heart as well as mine, is tenderly thoughtful and solicitous for your best good, dreamt you were dead. . . ." More notably, he added on to this sentence the phrase ". . . but we hearken not unto dreams."¹³ One can easily imagine Joanna waking in the night after her nightmare, wanting and perhaps even de-

manding that Mr. Cotton inquire about their son's safety. John likely consoled her by admonishing her to pay no mind to dreams and other superstitions. Certainly, his journal and published sermons suggest that, when he preached to Indian and English audiences, he relied solely upon written Scriptures and ignored the supernatural.¹⁴ Nonetheless, in the end, he did write a letter to Josiah and admitted that he, too, felt apprehensive about his son's safety and wellbeing in the aftermath of his wife's dream. Although he tried

to dismiss her nightmare as useless superstition, he nonetheless reluctantly responded to it and submitted to his wife's emotion-filled pleas. This episode suggests that the Cottons' marriage, and perhaps the marriages of other Puritans, involved at least some degree of mutual submission.

Joanna Cotton's son, like her husband, sometimes felt that she was moved too easily by nonrational considerations. He was critical and suspicious of the "world of wonders" of ordinary colonists. He was particularly critical of the emotional outbursts that took place during the revival meetings of the mid-1700s. Furthermore, in more specific reference to his mother, in his memoirs, Josiah reflected that she too easily succumbed to despair and affliction. He further surmised that sadness and depression may have contributed to her death. Josiah believed that suffering was a part of the human condition and that his mother needed to toughen up and do a better job of accepting it. He never clearly indicated whether or not he was referring to the suffering caused by his father's infidelity, but simply referred to his mother's suffering in general terms. Nonetheless, it is clear from his stated objections that Joanna valued an emotionally expressive type of Christianity while her male family members preferred a more rational and detached faith.¹⁵

"Doctor" Joanna Cotton

Additional evidence regarding Joanna Cotton's life suggests that she pursued diverse employment and service opportunities. Like many other women in the region, including many Native American women, Joanna worked as a healer and physician. Before the professionalization of medicine occurred, many women were able to occupy a niche as midwives and healers in early America. In his memoirs, Josiah stated that his mother had "a great insight for the medicinal art, in the practice whereof she was much improved and became very skillful and helpful in the town."¹⁶ Not only was Joanna a "doctor" of sorts, but she was apparently quite effective. Josiah's comments suggest that a woman pursuing this type of public work was paid, encouraged, and praised by the surrounding community.¹⁷

Contextual evidence related to other women who performed medical work suggests that Joanna blended scientific study, Christian prayer, native herbs, and Native American techniques. Scholars who have studied the development of medicine in colonial Massachusetts have found that English practitioners incorporated certain aspects of Native American knowledge.¹⁸ In

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one letter, John indicated that Joanna was seeking “spleen-wart,” a plant native to North America that provided her a degree of relief from an ailment.¹⁹ Other scholars, including those who have studied Josiah Cotton’s ministry among New England Indians, have emphasized how cultural exchange characterized medical practice during this period.²⁰ It is likely that Native Americans were the ones who communicated knowledge regarding the use and whereabouts of this plant to the English. Joanna herself then incorporated and disseminated this medical information to others and used it to treat her own ailments. To be an effective medical worker, Joanna had to read about the latest treatments and discuss her practice with other community members, including Native Americans.

Joanna as deputy husband and religious adviser

Joanna’s work as a healer suggests that she was not restricted to what we often think of as “typical” household chores. She did much more than simply clean clothes and cook food. Indeed, available documents indicate that she was a well-educated woman who took charge of her household during her husband’s frequent absences. In his memoirs, Josiah Cotton stated that Joanna “was one that ruled her children and servants well, before whom she was very careful to set good examples, keeping up family duties in my father’s absence.”²¹ Joanna’s duties included taking charge over male and female servants. This included adult men, whose activities Joanna regularly supervised. Joanna and John also had eleven children, and it is clear that Joanna was often in sole command of this large assembly of youngsters and adults. Her status as a woman did not prevent her from taking a leadership role in her husband’s absence. She clearly fit the profile of a “deputy husband.”

The evidence indicates that Joanna Cotton did not shy away from her duties or suffer from a lack of preparedness or confidence. Her son Josiah stated that his mother “instructed suitably, corrected seasonably, [and] had a notable faculty in speaking and writing.”²² She was certainly literate and took charge of her family’s education, including that of her sons, several of whom went on to become ministers, missionaries, and judges. Josiah indicated that she even possessed a limited knowledge of Latin and poetry. The fact that she adhered to a more mystical set of religious beliefs did not mean that she was unreasonable or unlearned. Instead, it appears that she combined her emphasis upon wonders and the supernatural with an informed biblical perspective. What kind of religious instruction did she provide to her children and servants? Did she communicate her mystical brand of Christianity to the family, or her husband’s dogmatic version? Her letters, which include a combination of scriptural references and descriptions of the supernatural, suggest that she blended the two. This is not surprising, as many English colonists of the period likewise consulted the Bible, but also paid attention to portents and wonders.²³

Not only did Joanna direct her young children, but her care, attention, and direction extended well into her children’s adult years. Like many other English parents of the period, Joanna felt it was her duty and right to intervene in the lives of her adult chil-

dren. She asked about their piety, warned them of God’s wrath, and urged them to live sober and devoted lives. When her adult children took up certain careers or expressed an intent to marry a prospective spouse, she provided her input. Clearly, Joanna’s authority over her sons, particularly her moral authority, did not fade as her sons reached adulthood. She continued to feel that it was perfectly acceptable to direct these men and provide advice to them, whether they asked for it or not. In at least some situations, it seems, Puritan women *could and would* offer instruction to adult men.²⁴

Conclusion

In 1697, John Cotton Jr.’s church in Plymouth called for his removal. As was the case nearly thirty years earlier, he was suspected of improper relationships with other women. Whether the charges were accurate or not is impossible to tell, but available documents suggest that most witnesses believed in John’s guilt. Once again, Cotton and his family, particularly his wife Joanna, suffered because of his suspected sexual indiscretions. Josiah Cotton’s memoirs say little about Joanna’s reaction to the first incident in 1666. Josiah did record, however, that she was quite unhappy, and that she refused to leave Plymouth and go to South Carolina in 1698 because her husband was suspected of sexual sin yet again.²⁵ With New England congregations reluctant to hire the aging and scandal-ridden minister, John Cotton Jr. was left to pursue other employment options. Desperation, and perhaps a desire for a new start, drove him to leave his family behind and accept a ministerial position in Charleston, a community known for disease and short life spans. John Cotton Jr. would only survive in South Carolina for about ten months.

Josiah wrote that, upon learning of John Cotton Jr.’s death in 1699, Joanna, “who had been under great concern of mind about her removing out of her native country, was now released from her trouble on that head. . . .”²⁶ It is clear that John Cotton Jr.’s “indiscretions” placed a burden upon his wife. It might seem, at first glance, that Joanna faced the worst-case scenario of being a wife trapped in a marriage to an unfaithful husband. There is truth to this, and it does seem that Joanna suffered tremendously because of her husband’s behavior. Yet, if we focus only upon the limitations faced by women such as Joanna, we miss the opportunity to understand the depth of their experiences.

In sum, Joanna was much more than just a victim of her husband’s unfaithfulness. She was an independent-minded, influential, and assertive woman who actively pursued her selected interests. It is clear from the historical records that she took advantage of available opportunities to lead, teach, and utilize her gifts. These opportunities included paid medical work and teaching others about religious matters. This teaching and leading included not only children, but also adult male servants and adult male progeny. As such, she highlights the fact that Puritan families often lived out a more egalitarian lifestyle than we may assume. Joanna’s life also reveals how *defying* restrictive gender ideals could empower her ability to serve members of her family and the surrounding community.

Notes

1. Len Travers, ed., "Notes and Documents: The Missionary Journal of John Cotton, Jr., 1666–1678," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 109 (1997): 53.
2. Sheila McIntyre, "John Cotton, Jr.: Wayward Puritan Minister?" in *The Human Tradition in Colonial America*, ed. Ian K. Steele and Nancy L. Rhoden (Wilmington, DE: SR Books/Scholarly Resources, 1999); Mark A. Peterson, "The Plymouth Church and the Evolution of Puritan Religious Culture," *The New England Quarterly* 66 (December 1993): 582–93; Travers, "Notes and Documents," 53.
3. Peterson, "The Plymouth Church"; Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2001), 199; Travers, "Notes and Documents," 52–59; David Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries: Colonists, Christianity, and Community among the Wampanoag Indians of Martha's Vineyard, 1600–1871* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 49–53; Douglas Winiarski, "A Question of Plain Dealing: Josiah Cotton, Native Christians, and the Quest for Security in Eighteenth-Century Plymouth Colony," *New England Quarterly* 77 (September 2004): 368–413; "All Manner of Error and Delusion: Josiah Cotton and the Religious Transformation of Southeastern New England, 1700–1770," (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2000); Jason Eden, "Gender and the Puritan Mission to the Native People of New England, 1620–1750," *Priscilla Papers* 24 (Autumn 2010): 4–9. Noticeably lacking in much of this literature, as well as scholarly analyses of other Puritan missionaries, is any appreciation for the work of wives in supporting the work of missionaries.
4. David Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 34–35; John Cotton, *Singing of Psalmes: A Gospel Ordinance, or a Treatise Wherein are Handled These Particulars* (London: J.R., 1650), 42.
5. Benjamin Wadsworth, *A Well-Ordered Family* (Boston, MA: Bartholomew Green, 1712); Cotton, *Singing of Psalmes*; Taylor, *American Colonies*, 159–203.
6. Numerous sociological and psychological studies reveal that, even among those American evangelicals who espouse rigid gender roles, there is in fact a high level of egalitarianism present in their actual relationships. For a helpful survey of this literature, see John P. Bartkowski, "Debating Patriarchy: Discursive Disputes over Spousal Authority among Evangelical Family Commentators," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36 (1997): 407.



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7. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*; Richard Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in 17th Century Massachusetts* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).
8. Laurel Ulrich, *Goodwives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1982); Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife: New England Women and the Whaleshery, 1720–1870* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1980); Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977).
9. Some of the more important studies of elite versus popular Puritan religious expressions include Hall; Weisman; Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Douglas Winiarski, "'Pale Blewish Lights' and a Dead Man's Groan: Tales of the Supernatural from Eighteenth-Century Plymouth, Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (October 1998): 497–530. Important works addressing differences among Puritan elites include Michael P. Winship, "'The Most Glorious Church in the World': The Unity of the Godly in Boston, Massachusetts, in the 1630s," *The Journal of British Studies* 39 (January 2000): 71–98; Janice Knight, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Theodore Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Louise A. Breen, *Transgressing the Bounds: Subversive Enterprises among the Puritan Elite in Massachusetts, 1630–1692* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Douglas Winiarski, "Native American Popular Religion in New England's Old Colony, 1670–1770," *Religion and American Culture* 15 (Summer 2005): 147–86.
10. Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*, Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, 59–61.
11. Judith S. Graham, *Puritan Family Life: The Diary of Samuel Sewall* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 77, 154; John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1970), 145–70; Roger Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649–1699* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).
12. Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*, 63.
13. Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*, 51.
14. Travers, "Notes and Documents"; John Cotton Jr., *Upon the Death of that Aged, Pious, Sincere-hearted Christian, John Alden, Esq. Late Magistrate of New-Plimouth Colony, who Died Sept. 12th, 1687, Being about Eighty nine Years of Age* (Boston, 1687); John Cotton Jr. and George Kieth, *A Refutation of Three Opposers of Truth, by Plain Evidence of the Holy Scripture* (Philadelphia, PA: William Bradford, 1690).
15. Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*, 48–52; Winiarski, "All Manner of Error."
16. Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*, 48–49.
17. McIntyre, "John Cotton, Jr.," 131–33; Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*, 48–49.
18. Richard D. Brown, "The Healing Arts in Colonial and Revolutionary Massachusetts: The Context for Scientific Medicine," in Frederick S. Allis Jr. et al., eds., *Medicine in Colonial Massachusetts, 1620–1820* (Boston, MA: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1980), 35–47; George E. Gifford Jr., "Botanic Remedies in Colonial Massachusetts, 1620–1820," in Allis et al., *Medicine in Colonial Massachusetts*, 263–88.
19. Thomas Prince papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, letter to unknown recipient; McIntyre, "John Cotton, Jr.," 31–133.
20. Winiarski, "Native American Popular Religion," 162–64.
21. Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*, 49.
22. Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*, 49.
23. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*; Winship, "The Most Glorious Church"; Seeman, *Pious Persuasions*; Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*.
24. Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*.
25. Thomas Milton Halsey, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Sewall* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 389; Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*, 44–46; McIntyre, "John Cotton, Jr.," 133–36; Peterson, "The Plymouth Church," 582–93.
26. Josiah Cotton, *Memoirs*, 45.