

Of Morality and Sex

Katherine Aines was sentenced to be whipped at both Plymouth and Taunton and to wear a red letter "B" on her upper garment

(Stratton) We are always trying to make puritans of the Puritans and the Plymouth colonists, and then we call them hypocrites if we find they did not always act in the manner we have chosen for them.

The people of Plymouth Colony were very human, and they had very human appetites. In some cases they do not resemble the twentieth-century human because of a difference in prevailing knowledge and philosophies, but in others they differed only because of environmental constraints. In matters of sexuality, the Plymouth colonists were subject to all the desires of the flesh inherent in all human beings, but in matters of morality they placed inhibitions on their desires, using the Bible as the justification for the greatest restraints. They emphasized the avoidance of temptation through Bible study, sermons, laws, and, when necessary, after the fact, punishments. They were well aware of how powerful the sex drive could be, and they tried to tame it, for they knew that they could not suppress it.

On 1 September 1640 Thomas Pinson and his wife Joan were convicted of incontinency before marriage, he to be whipped and she to sit in the stocks.

On 2 November 1640 Francis West and Margery his wife were found guilty of incontinency with one another before marriage, and both were sentenced to sit in the stocks; interestingly, Francis was also sentenced to build a pair of stocks in Duxbury within two months.

On 1 March 1641/42 John Caseley and his wife Alice of Barnstable were sentenced for fornication before their marriage, he to be whipped, she to sit in the stocks.

On 4 June 1645 John Ellis of Sandwich was sentenced to be whipped at the public post for uncleanness with his wife before marriage, and his wife Elizabeth was sentenced to stand and watch his punishment.

On 6 March 1648/49 Peregrine White, born on the Mayflower, and his wife Sarah, both of Marshfield, were fined for fornication before marriage.

On 17 January 1671 Mary Churchill confessed that she was gotten with with child by Thomas Doty, son of Mayflower passenger Edward, with whom she had "carnall coppulation" three times. The first occasion was about 15 July last, the second was on 8 August last, and the third was about a "senight" after. Sergeant Ephraim Tinkham testified that around the stated second time, he had gone to Joseph Churchill's house to speak to him, but no one answered his knock. He went in and after he heard some noise from another room, Mary Churchill came forth. He apparently had reason to suspect that Thomas Doty was there, for he asked Mary if Thomas was in the house, and after some pause she said he was. Tinkham and Doty went away together, Tinkham warning him to take heed lest evil come of such carriages. Mary Churchill later was fined £6. At the time of her court hearing, Thomas had fled the colony, but records show that they later married sometime after their first child was born.

In some of the records showing how sexual offenses were punished, we see hints of double standards revealing underlying attitudes of colonists, not only toward Indians, but also toward women.

On 3 September 1639 Mary, the wife of Robert Mendlove of Duxbury, was charged "with dallyance divers tymes wth Tinsin, an Indian, and after committing the act of uncleannesse wth him as by his owne confession by sevall interpters is made apparent, the Bench doth censure the said Mary to be whipt at a carts tayle through the townes streets, and to weare a badge upon her left sleeve during her aboad wthin this govnt; and if shee shalbe found without it abroad, then to be burned in the face wth a hott iron; and the said Tinsin, the Indian, to be well whipt wth a halter about his neck at the post, because it arose through the allurement & inticement of the said Mary, that hee was drawne thereunto."

On 26 October 1686 Ruth Everett of Scituate was convicted "of having a bastard child Born of her Body which by the complexion appears to have been begotten by an Indian and she will not confess who the father of it is," and thus she was sentenced "to be whipt 30 stripes: 15 now at Plimouth and 15 at Sittuate...unless she in the meantime confess who the father of her child is."

Hannah Tubbs, wife of William Tubbs, Jr. of Duxbury, was sentenced in 1687 to a £5 fine or thirty stripes for agreeing with James Brown, an Indian, to commit adultery with him. Yet in June 1688, when Thomas Wild of Marshfield was charged with getting Hannah, the Indian servant of Joseph Waterman, with child, he was ordered

only to pay Waterman twenty shillings "toward the charge occasioned thereby," and nothing more appears in the records about the case.

For sheer numbers, cases of fornication far exceeded cases of adultery, but it is clear that adultery was quite visibly present in the colony.

On 7 December 1641 Thomas Bray of Yarmouth, a single person, and Anne, the wife of Francis Linceford, were charged with having "comitted the act of adultery and uncleanesse, and have divers tymes layne in one bed together in the absence of her husband, wch has beene confessed by both pties." Being found guilty, they were sentenced to be severely whipped immediately at the public post and again at Yarmouth, where the offense was committed, and they were to wear as long as they were in the colony the two letters "AD" for "Adulterers" on a conspicuous part of their upper garments, and if they were found anywhere in the colony without the letters, they would be whipped on each such occasion.

On 5 March 1656/57 William Paule, a Scotsman, was sentenced to be whipped and to pay the costs of his imprisonment and punishment for his "unclean and filthy behaviour with the wife of Alexander Aines." Katherine Aines was sentenced to be whipped at both Plymouth and Taunton and to wear a red letter "B" on her upper garment. Alexander Aines, for leaving his family and exposing his wife to such temptations, was sentenced to sit in the stocks while his wife and Paule were being whipped, and also to pay the costs of his wife's imprisonment and punishment.

Though fair-minded in determining guilt, the Plymouth leaders themselves acknowledged that their punishments were severe. Bradford wrote concerning the year 1642 that it was surprising to see how wickedness was growing in the colony, "wher the same was so much witnessed against, and so narrowly looked unto, and severly punished." He admitted that they had been censured even by moderate and good men "for their severities in punishments." And he noted, "Yet all this could not suppress the breaking out of sundrie notorious sins... espetially drunkennes and unclainnes; not only incontinenie betweene persons unmarried, for which many both men and women have been punished sharply enough, but some married persons allso. But that which is worse, even sodomie and bugerie, (things fearfull to name,) have broak forth in this land, oftener then once."

The event which apparently provoked these observations from the governor was mentioned very briefly in court records of 7 September 1642: "Thomas Graunger, late servant to Love Brewster of Duxborrow, was this Court indicted for buggery wth a mare, a cowe, two goats, divers sheepe, two calves, and a turkey, and was found guilty, and received sentence of death by hanging untill he was dead." The executioner was Mr. John Holmes, the Messenger of the court, and in his account he claimed as due him £1 for ten weeks boarding of Granger, and £2/10 for executing Granger and eight beasts. Bradford described Granger as about sixteen or seventeen years of age. Someone saw him in the act with the mare, and he was examined and confessed. The animals were individually killed before his face, according to Leviticus 20:15, and were buried in a pit, no use being made of them. Bradford relates that on examination of both Granger and someone else who had made a sodomitical attempt on another, they were asked where they learned such practices, and one confessed he "had long used it in England," while Granger said he had been taught it by another, and had heard of such things when he was in England.