

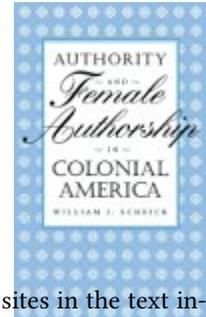
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



William J. Scheick. *Authority and Female Authorship in Colonial America*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. x + 150 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2054-6.

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*Authority and Female Authorship in Colonial America* is a companion piece to Scheick's previous study in which he explored the narrative phenomenon of "logogic sites," places in seventeenth-century texts where there is convergence, and resulting tension, between secular and divine meanings. In his new work, Scheick again examines texts for those moments of tension produced by differing systems of belief, but this time he discovers sites of "logonomic conflict," defined as "peculiar, sometimes subversive, narrative effects that demarcate certain tensions extant within culturally regulated ideological complexes" (p. 2). While the logogic site exhibits authorial anxiety at the junction of secular and divine meanings, the logonomic site reveals underlying cultural tensions produced by the friction of different ideological systems and their always unresolved contestation over cultural authority. Scheick analyzes the logonomic sites created by female writers' negotiation between personal and orthodox (male) authority in colonial life. The study examines the work of both noted and more obscure writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The first chapter contraposes Cotton Mather and Mary English, the latter a participant in the Salem witch trials in 1692. Scheick notes the connection between these two—Mather was one of the judges at the trial—but, more importantly, uses their work to reveal logonomic conflicts about female authority at the end of the seventeenth century. Employing Mather's *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (1691-92), Scheick reveals an unconscious tension in Mather's acknowledgement of the female role within the Church and, contemporaneously, his antipathy toward such manifestations of female power. For instance, his preferral of Eve over the Virgin Mary as a model for colonial women undercuts female authority through acknowledgement of the for-

mer's sin. This and other logonomic sites in the text indicate Mather's notions of female authority in respect to the church remain conflicted and unresolved. The voice of Mary English is represented in her undated poem, a prayer to God that she might obey Him and emulate Mary as her example. Building upon recent critical scholarship, Scheick reads the poem as an expression of authorial anxiety over friction between expected forms of female obedience as mandated by the Church and English's apparently willful desire to rebel against this role by adopting, instead, the female form of authority offered by witchcraft. Revealing English's anxiety in an illuminating word-by-word analysis, Scheick argues that the poem's language and prosody ultimately make it "unstable" and therefore a site of logonomic conflict.

Chapter Two explores the work of Anne Bradstreet (1608-1672) and Esther Edwards Burr (1728-71). Modern scholars of Bradstreet have commented on emotional and aesthetic disjunctions in her work that seem to indicate her anxiety about female authorship and its challenge to colonial male authority. One such disjunction appears in one of Bradstreet's love poems to her husband, "Letter to her Husband, Absent Upon Publick Employment," where, Scheick argues, her desire for scriptural authorization of her love results in the poem's abrupt inclusion of biblical allusion at the end, creating narrative disjunction by focusing suddenly upon the biblical and by erasing her authorial voice. The struggle to "dwell in the Lord" and reject earthly relationships characterizes as well the writing of Esther Edwards Burr, born sixty years after the death of Bradstreet. Daughter of Jonathan Edwards and therefore schooled in the orthodox Puritan beliefs of Original Sin and the glories of the afterlife, Burr nonetheless rejoices in two earthly friendships, one with her husband and the other with her friend, Sarah Prince.

Her letters and epistolary journal that contain expressions of her love for these two cannot, however, quiet Burr's doubts about the propriety of her feelings. These moments of tension in her writing are revealed especially after her husband's death when the disparity between the heat of her friendship with Burr and Prince and her lukewarm relations with God is revealed through her comments about the spiritual "deadness" she feels.

In Chapter Three, Scheick examines works by two eighteenth-century Quaker women who also struggled with conflicts over personal authorization and cultural authority. Elizabeth Hanson's record of her captivity and eventual release, "God's Mercy Surmounting Man's Cruelty" (1728), expresses contemporaneously gratitude for God's releasing her from bondage and anger for His allowing this tragedy that has destroyed her family. Scheick points out Hanson's use of strikingly similar language in descriptions of her captivity by the natives and in her plea at the end of the narrative to be held by God's will, that is to be placed in another form of captivity that will prevail over her "bitter feelings of resistant grief" (p. 91). In an enlightening and fresh reading, Scheick succeeds at showing on many levels the inherent logonomic conflict in Elizabeth Ashbridge's autobiography, *Some Account of the Forepart of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge* (1774). Continuing with the metaphor of bondage begun in his discussion of Hanson, Scheick explains "bondage" in Ashbridge's life by describing her experiences as indentured servant, as daughter, as wife, and, finally, as woman. After eloping from her father's house, Ashbridge initially seeks to find her voice on the stage despite the Church's general condemnation of theatre. Later, in a stunning inversion of her earlier disobedience—rejecting the authority of her father and intending to join the theatre world—Ashbridge becomes a preacher, thereby assuming both a patriarchal and a theatrical role. As Ashbridge herself notes, early disobedience actually brought her "Good," a paradox that never is resolved in the autobiography. Perhaps the strongest part of this slim volume is the final chapter, which showcases Scheick's elegant explications informed by his scriptural commentary. Here he examines three works of Phillis Wheatley: two relatively obscure paraphrases of scripture, and the other, Wheatley's well-known "On Being Brought from Africa to America." The paraphrases retell respectively the stories of Goliath and David (1 Samuel 17) and of the warrior, Isaiah, who foretells the coming of a David-like figure who will slay God's enemies (Isaiah LXII). In both paraphrases, Wheatley emphasizes and enlarges upon the moments of

combat, adding to the bloodiness of the original descriptions. Scheick suggests that the paraphrases work on two fronts: as authorized tributes to the Church's overcoming Philistine-like forces, and as unauthorized criticism of African enslavement. Scheick supports his reading of the unauthorized themes by reminding us of Wheatley's anti-slavery convictions stated elsewhere and by suggesting Wheatley recognizes the scriptural message about the power of language to achieve victory, whether divine or political.

The argument for a subversive and self-authorizing text in Wheatley's writing is perhaps more convincing in Scheick's reading of "On Being brought from Africa to America." Contemporary critics have read this poem as an expression of religious equality, that is, the expression that both blacks and whites are sullied by Original Sin and that both have the potential to become saved through the grace of God. Building upon these interpretations, Scheick employs syntactic analysis and biblical exegesis to reveal further logonomic conflicts in the poem. He suggests, for instance, that through biblical and aesthetic integration, the poem becomes a site of self-authorization for Wheatley as she becomes the ministerial voice reminding both races of man's relation to God and thus rejecting scripturally-authorized, racist claims about the inherited evil of the black race. Ultimately, Wheatley succeeds in combining her religious and political arguments to promote Christian and racial equality.

Inevitably, perhaps, for the reader of these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works, conflicts between sacred and secular beliefs become foregrounded, and as a result gendered tensions become less prominent. Scheick manages to steer the reader back to the issue of gender, however, by scrutinizing the conflict between scriptural and secular meanings and discovering the tension between authorized and unauthorized authority. Through meticulous close readings and the synthesis of a large array of recent scholarship, Scheick convincingly demonstrates the ways in which these early texts express the uncertainties of female authorization in colonial America.

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