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Book Review: American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman Who Defied the Puritans

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American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman Who Defied the Puritans. Eve LaPlante. 2004. New York: HarperSanFrancisco. 312 pp. (Includes chronology genealogy, bibliography, and index). \$24.95 (Hardcover). \$14.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Marla Kohlman¹

Eve LaPlante offers a very detailed journey back to the 17th century and places the reader in the midst of the life experiences of Anne Hutchinson, John Cotton, who would become the grandfather of the infamous Puritan minister Cotton Mather, and John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the United States. The text is invaluable as an explanation of how the Puritans, who were growing increasingly displeased with the Anglican Church in England, came to see themselves as a separate sect of Anglican worshippers who sought to cleave more faithfully to certain Calvinist principles from which they believed the Church of England had been led astray. LaPlante presents a clear and exhaustive treatment of how the Puritans came to be defined as such – the label “Puritan” was originally ascribed to this group of believers as a descriptive epithet and, as LaPlante explains, the name simply stuck. What is particularly remarkable about LaPlante’s presentation is her description of the political issues that were entwined with matters of church doctrine as the Puritans become increasingly alienated from the Church of England and, later, moved to establish themselves in the New World. The transition depicted by LaPlante is one based upon a faith-seeking freedom that was necessarily linked with governmental leadership for the settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Rhode Island, and several other colonies that would later become New England states.

It is to her credit that LaPlante is forthright about the fact that this is not simply a piece of history about which she has been dispassionately researching, because she has a personal stake in this endeavor. LaPlante is a direct descendent of Anne Hutchinson and she makes plain that this is something that her family emphasized quite often as a young child growing up in New England. In the concluding chapter of her presentation, she also tells the reader that Franklin Delano Roosevelt, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush are also direct descendents of Anne Hutchinson, pointing to this as proof that “[t]hrough her powerful male descendents, Anne Hutchinson continues to leave her mark” (243).

LaPlante presents the reader with three ideas which she deems important to understanding the life and legacy of Anne Hutchinson: her devotion to God and her extensive knowledge of the Bible; the constraints placed upon her by her gender in the 17th century; and the need to understand how these two components were ultimately the reason for her misfortunes in life, although it does not seem that LaPlante believes Hutchinson would have seen it this way. According to LaPlante, Hutchinson’s religious fervor was bred in her from an early age by her father, a practicing clergyman in England, who took issue with some elements of the Anglican church and, thereby, was convicted of heresy and placed under house arrest during Hutchinson’s formative years. Thus it was that Hutchinson learned at an early age to speak her mind where matters of religion were concerned. As she came of age, Hutchinson became quite firm in her belief in the

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Calvinist principles of both predestination and God's saving grace. It was her belief in these principles which led her to cross paths with John Cotton, an extraordinarily gifted orator and preacher who also educated his parishioners according to these principles. As a point of fact, LaPlante depicts them as forming an alliance featuring Cotton as teacher and Hutchinson as an avid pupil. But she and Cotton become revered by others because of Hutchinson's extensive knowledge of the Bible and her ability to teach others, particularly women, of the discrepancies in the teachings of the Anglican Church, which she believed were counter to God's words as represented in the Bible. Moreover, in so doing, she "prepare[d] souls for John Cotton to convert" (100) both in England and again, once they are reunited years later, in Massachusetts.

On the other hand, it was her status as a woman who professed to have received the word of God "By the voice of his own spirit to my soul" (117) that rendered her guilty of both heresy and sedition. This was because she could not possibly expect the men judging her testimony to believe that God spoke directly to her because she was a woman, first and foremost, and being so, she could not possibly be a minister called to preach the word of God. Nonetheless, according to much of the testimony before the judges, including her own, this is exactly what she had been doing. For this she was banished from Massachusetts.

This was fortuitous in some respects. LaPlante cites documentary evidence that this led to the establishment of Harvard College "as a way of minimizing Hutchinson's threat" (133) and she details the way in which Hutchinson's banishment from Massachusetts led to the establishment of Rhode Island as a colony.

It is in her death nonetheless, that LaPlante best presents the extent of Hutchinson's awesome faith, not only in God, but in the essential goodness of humanity. As the Dutch settlers she lived among during the final years of her life were vacating their homes in anticipation of an attack by Siwanoy Indians (in retaliation for an earlier attack on them which "had killed eighty Indian men, women and children"), Hutchinson "would not arm herself, nor would she and her children abandon her home" (236). As a result, she and her children were killed by the Siwanoy as her neighbors predicted, although LaPlante suggests that this might not have occurred if the Indians had been aware that Hutchinson and her family were English in origin rather than Dutch. But it is also in this matter that we are able to understand why some have characterized Hutchinson as oblivious and headstrong in the face of adversity, to her own detriment. According to all of the evidence presented by LaPlante and others, her absolute faith in what she believed to be the will of God was also the very source of her undoing, both as it determined the outcome of her trial on charges of heresy and sedition and the manner in which she died.

LaPlante's presentation of this material is, as I stated earlier, quite impressive in terms of the depth of research conducted in order to understand the contextual factors that help the reader to appreciate Hutchinson's life experiences and her legacy. There are quite a few details sprinkled throughout the text, however, which are a bit gratuitous and distract the reader from the overall narrative. One example of this is the treatment of Anne Hutchinson's father, Francis Marbury, and his house arrest for having challenged the efficacy of preaching under the Anglican church of his time. Although this information is important to understanding Hutchinson's firm belief in Puritan religious principles and quality preaching and teaching of same, the reader does not need to be

diverted from Hutchinson's story line for a full 20 pages to fully grasp this point. Likewise, it is vitally important to understand how John Cotton was both her friend and, in some respects, her protector during the course of her trial. Yet, again, the reader is deflected from the master narrative of Hutchinson's trial for a full 30 pages before LaPlante moves on with this point.

One can see how some of the intricacies of these more mundane details are important to LaPlante, as a descendent of Hutchinson, but she often goes a bit far afield in holding to her stated objective of offering "a balanced portrait of Anne Hutchinson's life and thought, in all their complexity, based on painstaking research into all the available documents" (xix). I was quite sympathetic to LaPlante's desire to provide the reader with the same amount of detail she had at her disposal to truly understand Hutchinson's words and deeds. Indeed, LaPlante renders it clear how mightily Hutchinson was influenced by others as well as having exerted a powerful influence on many who sought more strength and direction in their faith. However interesting, these lengthy diversions in the presentation of the text often made it hard to follow the thread of Hutchinson's life, and the reader is often thrust back and forth in both time and place in the quest for understanding her persecution and good works in both England and the colonies.

This text would be suitable for use in upper-level undergraduate classrooms in the liberal arts and humanities. I hesitate to say that it is an important text for Women's Studies, but in deference, say that it is an important text for Gender Studies, Sociology, and Social Psychology. This is because the reader, in this day and age, is ever-reminded that the nature of the charges against Hutchinson would never have been such a large issue *if she were a man*. After reading LaPlante's text, I was really impressed with the fervor with which Hutchinson approached her study of the Bible and the manner in which this fervor drew others to her, rather than her seeking to impose her beliefs on others. If she were a man, as John Cotton was, she would have been celebrated and exalted for her forthright assertions of God's prophecy unto her and the zeal she inspired in others to follow God's will as she did. It was truly her female sex which rendered this incomprehensible and, moreover, illegal, to the male political figures of her time, in both England and the colonies. The text as written, then, does an admirable job of reminding us that gender is socially constructed and ascribed at all points in our history and we can only make sense of events through an understanding of the context in which a person lives. It is significant that LaPlante reminds the reader several times during her discussion that there is no evidence that Hutchinson resented her station in life as a woman, as a wife, as a mother. She was not feminist in this way. Rather, she stated her experiences with God as a believer, gender notwithstanding, and endured quite readily whatever punishment was meted out.