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Lydia Prout's Dreadfullest Thought

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ON 20 October 1716 Lydia Prout retired to her bedchamber, where she reflected on her two children, who had perished within four days of one another during the previous summer. Inscribing her thoughts in a private devotional journal, Prout acknowledged that her own iniquities had provoked God to chasten her family, and she “begg’d” him to “discover to me wherefore he was so terrible angry with me in taking away all my Children at once.” At the same time, however, she envisioned her deceased son assuring her that he and his sister

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were in “Heaven shining among the saints in glory.” Buttressed by comforting scriptures, Prout’s encouraging belief in her children’s eternal salvation seemed to assuage her grief. So, too, did her participation in the Lord’s Supper two weeks later, during which she experienced a yearning desire to “be with christ in heaven.”¹

Prout attributed her elation to the fact that she was in the final days of her fifth pregnancy, which, she observed, was a “great mercy” from God. In an effort to prepare for her impending lying-in period, Prout observed a private day of thanksgiving in the hope that God “would yet give me a Seed on earth to serve him.” But during her devotional observance—as she was “in the mount with god”—Satan appeared suddenly before her, and “the dreadfullest thought darted into my mind.” It was a thought so shocking, Prout confessed in her journal, that “I would not express [it] for the world.” “It was more terrible to me than all the afflictions that ever I met with in all my life.” For days, Prout wondered whether she had “gone distracted” (pp. 14–15 [420–421]).

Events came full circle several weeks later, as Prout’s newborn daughter languished close to death in a “terrible Fit of Sickness.” Fearing the child beyond recovery, Prout prepared for yet another bereavement, pleading for strength to resign herself to divine providence “better than ever I had done.” This time, God was pleased to answer her prayer, restoring

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¹Journal of “My Grandmother Prout,” 1714–1716, transcr. [Lydia Cutler], n.d. [ca. early nineteenth century], Mss A 8922, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston (hereafter NEHGS). Page citations to the journal refers first to Cutler’s transcription and next in brackets to my annotated edition which appears in the APPENDIX to this essay. Roman numerals identify discrete entries in the journal.

not only her infant's failing health but Prout's flagging faith as well. Reflecting on the entire sequence of events from death to birth, illness to recovery, despair to hope, Prout counted herself among the fortunate. Closing her journal, she pledged "to live a new Life to the praise of God who has done so much for me. I cannot express the wonderfull goodness of God to me many a time both as to Soul & Body" (p. 15 [421]).

Published for the first time in the appendix that follows, Prout's journal (see fig. 1) is the third oldest diary composed by a woman in British North America. But unlike the works of her contemporaries Mehetabel Coit and Sarah Knight, or those of her neighbors and fellow parishioners in Boston's Old South Church—including the prominent merchant and magistrate Samuel Sewall—Prout's journal contains no references to the weather, personal travels, or notable local events; she did not crowd its pages with medicinal and culinary recipes or genealogical lists.² Instead, Prout restricted her occasional writing activities to recording religious meditations in which she contemplated God's providential dispensations toward her family. During the years in which Prout wrote in her journal (ca. 1709–16), she suffered through an unrelenting series of family traumas. All but the first of the nine entries clustered around the births and deaths of Prout's first four children (see chart), as well as her own bodily infirmities and the passing of

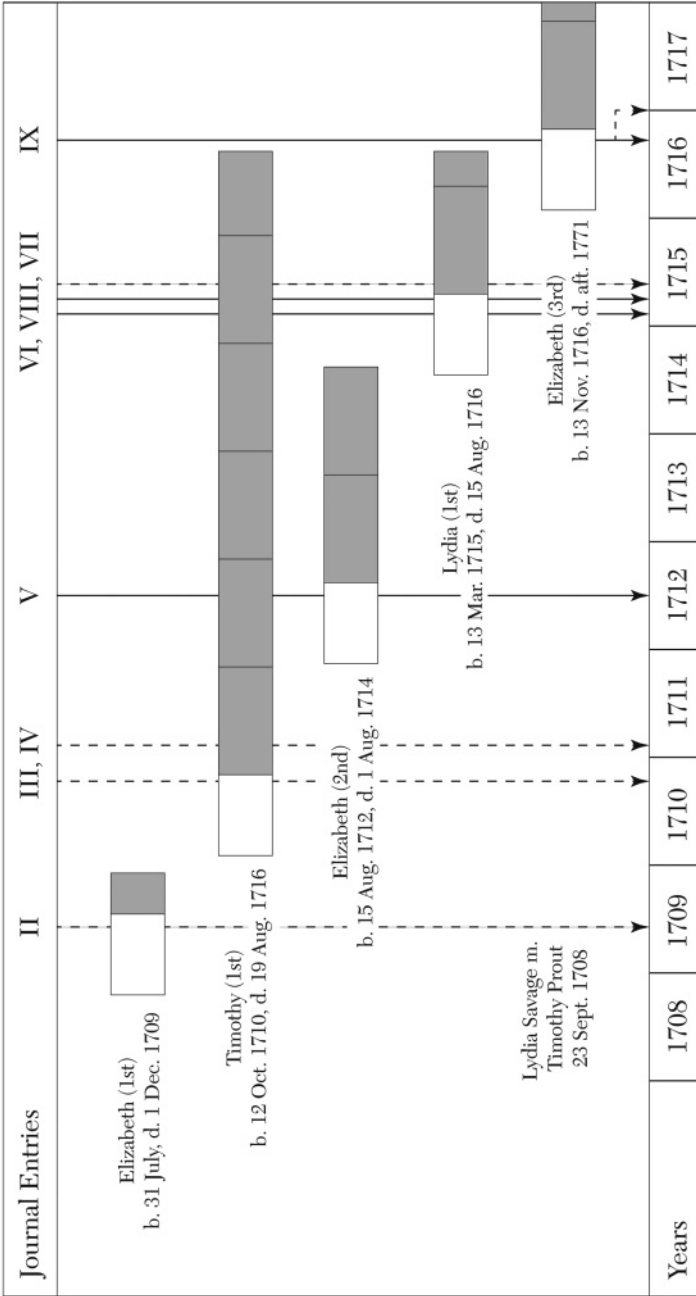
²Prout's journal is a rare exception to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's assertion that no female diaries from New England antedate 1750 (*Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1980], p. 280). For Coit and Knight, see Michelle Marchetti Coughlin, *One Colonial Woman's World: The Life and Writings of Mehetabel Chandler Coit* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); and Peter Benes, "Another Look at Madam Knight," in *In Our Own Words: New England Diaries, 1600 to the Present*, vol. 1: *Diary Diversity, Coming of Age*, ed. Benes, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, Annual Proceedings 2006/2007 (Boston: Boston University, 2009), pp. 13–23. For the diaries of Prout's male contemporaries and fellow parishioners in Boston's Old South Church, see S. F. Haven, ed., "Diary of Jeremiah Bumstead of Boston, 1722–1727," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 15 (July 1861): 193–204, 305–15; Abram English Brown, ed., "The Builder of the Old South Meeting-House," *New England Magazine*, n.s., 13 (September–February 1896): 390–98; and *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674–1729*, ed. M. Halsey Thomas, 2 vols. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973). For an earlier analysis of Prout's journal, see Erik R. Seeman's *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 46–47, 49, 52–53, 57, 99–100, 103.

My Grandmother Thought
 god has been pleased to let me see the miserable
 estate I was in by Nature. it was a very
 bitter thing unto me & so I continued a great
 while under the burden of it upon my
 conscience, but god was pleased to bring this
 place of scripture unto my mind which
 was a great comfort to me "fear not I am
 with thee. be not dismay'd I am thy God.
 I have smitten thee, yet will I uphold
 thee with the right hand of my righteous-
 ness. & this is another which was very
 sweet unto me god has not appointed
 us unto wrath but to obtain salvation
 thro our lord Jesus Christ this place was a
 great comfort to me but yet I continued
 under the burden of sin then that place
 came to my mind. which I was very much
 afraid I should not do. (if any one will be
 my disciple let him deny himself & take up
 his cross & follow me) knowing myself to
 be so weak in faith I was afraid in time
 of temptation I should fall away. then that
 place was a great comfort to me. come
 unto me all ye that labour & are heavy
 laden & I will give you rest. I thought I
 was willing to go to him & to accept of him
 on his own terms. to be my prophet priest
 & king, & to shelter my self under the shadows
 of his wings. one night being very melan-
 choly I thought I was not one of the elect
 but yet I thought I would seek unto him

FIG. 1.—First page of Lydia Cutler's manuscript copy of the journal of "My Grandmother Prout." Courtesy of the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

CHART

LYDIA PROUT'S CHILDREN AND JOURNAL ENTRIES



SOURCES: Journal of "My Grandmother Prout," 1714–1716, transcr. [Lydia Cutler], n.d. [ca. early nineteenth century], Mss A 8922, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston; Dale Ellison Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout of Boston* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 2002), pp. 69–70.

NOTE: Shaded boxes display the years, or partial years, of each child's life; unshaded boxes represent estimated pregnancies. Dashed lines show uncertain dates. The chart excludes journal entry I (composed ca. 1702) as well as Prout's children born after the last entry (IX): Lydia (2nd) (1718–bef. 1767), Ebenezer (1719–1804), Timothy (2nd) (1721–1777), Joseph (1723–1791), and Mary (1725–aft. 1797).

her mother. Her final six pregnancies (1716–25) yielded healthy infants who survived to adulthood, and yet by this time Prout had ceased recording her secret, or closet, devotions.

A product of puritans' traditional practice of piety, Prout's journal highlights the central role of life-course events in structuring the devotional writings of women in provincial New England.³ It challenges historians to look beyond the puritan morphology of conversion and grapple with aspects of lived religion, which Robert Orsi defines as the "study of how particular people, in particular places and times, live in, with, through, and against the religious idioms available to them." To read Prout's journal in such a manner necessarily involves paying close attention to the practices through which eighteenth-century men and women labored to construct meaningful worlds—especially in moments of birth, pain, and death—as well as to the plurality of discourses that both transgressed and reinscribed the "disciplinary confines of culture."⁴

Prout's meditations reveal the tension between prescriptive literature on female piety and the complicated ways in which young mothers narrated their religious experiences in their devotional writings. During the last quarter of the seventeenth century, women began to dominate the ranks of full church members in towns across New England. Their demographic ascendance, in turn, gave rise to a profusion of published sermons, funeral elegies, and memorials in which clergymen extolled the virtues of Christian motherhood. The model women

³On personal writing and puritan devotional practices, see Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 186–93, and Catherine A. Brekus, "Writing as a Protestant Practice: Devotional Diaries in Early New England," in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965*, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 19–34.

⁴Robert A. Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 7, 9–10, 13–14, and Orsi, contribution to "Forum: The Decade Ahead in Scholarship," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 3 (1993): 3–4. See also David D. Hall, "Narrating Puritanism," in *New Directions in American Religious History*, ed. Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 67–68.

who were praised in ministerial literature read and studied their Bibles conscientiously. They prayed and fasted, drew comfort from sermons, conversed eloquently about spiritual matters, approached the communion table at an early age, and, like Prout, kept devotional journals. Most important, New England clergymen extolled pious matrons for their humility, passivity, and resignation in the face of their sufferings. These ideal women submitted to the will of God in all things but especially in situations of childbirth and infant mortality.⁵

“Affliction,” the dominant theme in Prout’s devotional journal, was an elastic theological category in early modern Protestant discourse that encompassed a wide range of sufferings and trials, from accidents and illnesses to sudden deaths, epidemics, business reversals, political or religious persecution, Indian captivities and military losses, and natural calamities. Ministers likened affliction to a school of correction or a purifying alchemical furnace; and they expected their parishioners to improve—that is, profit from, or sanctify—divinely appointed suffering for their spiritual good. The puritans’ “theology of affliction” offered an especially stern rebuke to mothers who indulged in excessive grief.⁶ Even as clergymen championed the virtues of godly women in their sermons and theological

⁵Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668–1735,” *American Quarterly* 28 (Spring 1976): 20–40.

⁶I borrow this helpful phrase from David Harley, “The Theology of Affliction and the Experience of Sickness in the Godly Family, 1650–1714: The Henrys and Newcomes,” in *Religio Medici: Medicine and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Andrew Cunningham (Aldershot, Eng.: Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 273–92. For examples of the range of afflictions, see David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), pp. 122, 125, 127, 129, 136, 163, 168, 203, 214, 235. For more detailed discussions of the pervasive language of improving, or sanctifying, afflictions, see Stephen J. Stein, ed., “For Their Spiritual Good: The Northampton, Massachusetts, Prayer Bids of the 1730s and 1740s,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 37 (1980): 267–69, and Ross W. Beales Jr., “The Smiles and Frowns of Providence,” in *Wonders of the Invisible World, 1600–1900*, ed. Peter Benes, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, Annual Proceedings 1992 (Boston: Boston University, 1995), pp. 86–96. See also Elaine Forman Crane, “‘I Have Suffer’d Much Today’: The Defining Force of Pain in Early America,” in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 370–403.

treatises, they worked to constrain the desires and emotions that Prout vented on the pages of her journal.

Prout was never able to rise above her doubts and fears, perhaps because she met with nearly constant affliction in her young adult life. Facing dangerous periods of travail every twenty-one months, on average, while enduring the deaths of four children and her mother, the Boston gentlewoman was no stranger to heartache and disappointment. It was on these occasions that she encountered “murmuring” thoughts, “unruly passion,” and even the figure of the devil himself. Little wonder that she often cried to God for strength to withstand Satan’s fiery darts. “Lord help me to beleive,” she once prayed, “for I find it hard work to believe” (pp. 8, 10, 5 [414, 416, 412]).

What was Lydia Prout’s “dreadfullest thought”? And why did she refuse to name it in her journal? Prout may have grown so melancholy that she contemplated suicide, or she may have questioned the existence of God. If so, in both cases she chose not to join the ranks of those New England ministers and lay people who wrote candidly about the sins of self-murder and atheism.⁷ I would like to suggest a different interpretive possibility. Suffering through divinely appointed afflictions of Jobian proportion—torn between Christian duty and maternal desire—Prout may have derived little comfort from her pastors’ sermons or the literary ideal of the virtuous woman that took shape during her lifetime. Instead, she may have entertained, however momentarily, the illicit fantasies of witchcraft confessors as a conceptual alternative to her well-honed Reformed faith.



Born in Boston in 1686, Lydia Prout was the ninth and youngest child of Elizabeth Scottow and Thomas Savage Jr. Her immediate relatives were pillars of the community: prosperous

⁷See, e.g., John Owen King III, *The Iron of Melancholy: Structures of Spiritual Conversion in America from the Puritan Conscience to Victorian Neurosis* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), pp. 49–53.

and powerful merchants, military leaders, civil magistrates, and local ministers. Lydia was baptized as an infant and admitted to full communion in Boston's prestigious Old South Church at the youthful age of sixteen. She married Timothy Prout—scion of a prominent Watertown, Massachusetts, family—in 1708 and settled into a comfortable residence on Milk Street, in the heart of Boston's wealthy mercantile district. Timothy was a prominent public figure who served on numerous church committees and held important elected and appointed town offices, including constable, overseer of the poor, selectman, justice of the peace, and representative to the Massachusetts General Court. He owned enslaved Africans and dabbled in West Indian commercial ventures, but he derived the bulk of his large estate from the rents and other revenues he extracted from his vast landholdings. In 1727, Timothy purchased a large plantation at Black Point (now Scarborough), Maine, from the estate of Lydia's maternal grandfather, Joshua Scottow. Celebrated in Winslow Homer's haunting seascapes more than a century later, Prout's Neck became the family's permanent home sometime during the 1740s. Lydia died in Boston in July 1734 "after a long and tedious Indisposition"; her husband never remarried. Until his death in 1767, Timothy lived at Prout's Neck, surrounded by his children, grandchildren, and servants, in a house filled with books and material amenities and adorned by the Prout family crest and a portrait of his wife.⁸

⁸Lawrence Park, "Old Boston Families Number Three: The Savage Family," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 67 (July 1913): 206; *The Records of the Churches of Boston*, transcr. Robert J. Dunkle and Ann S. Lainhart, CD-ROM (Boston: NEHGS, 2002); Dale Ellison Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout of Boston* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 2002), pp. 66–70; Annie Haven Thwing, *Inhabitants and Estates of the Town of Boston, 1630–1800, and "The Crooked and Narrow Streets of Boston, 1630–1822,"* CD-ROM (Boston: NEHGS, 2001); Timothy Prout, Will, 1 September 1767, Coll. S-2076, Maine Historical Society, Portland; Timothy Prout, Account Book, 1753–1755, G.41.15, Boston Public Library, Hamilton Andrews Hill, *History of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston, 1669–1884*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1890), 1:409, 422, 436–37, 486, 583; *York Deeds* (Portland: Maine Genealogical Society, 1904), bk. 12, fol. 276; *Boston Gazette*, 15 July 1734. For Homer's paintings, see *Winslow Homer in the 1890s: Prout's Neck Observed*, ed. Philip C. Beam (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990). The portrait of Lydia Prout that Timothy willed in 1767 to their eldest son, Ebenezer, has not been located.

Although it is unclear when Lydia Prout began writing in her devotional journal, the first entry (I) appears to be a copy of the church admission narrative, or “relation,” that she submitted to minister Samuel Willard when she joined the Old South Church.⁹ Like many early eighteenth-century relations, her testimony opened with a concise description of the routinized cycles of doubt and assurance that were the hallmark of the puritan morphology of conversion. “God has been pleased to let me see the miserable estate I was in by Nature,” Prout lamented. Meditative exercises evoked the comforting words of Isaiah 41:10, “fear not I am with thee. Be not dismay’d I am thy God.” Still, Prout knew herself to be “weak in faith,” and she began to worry that she was not “one of the elect” (p. 1 [409]).

Round and round she went, as anxieties about her future estate gave way to joyful assurance, then rapidly dissipated into nagging fears of complacency. Satan darted temptations into her mind; reading a book on the dangers of hypocrisy disturbed her greatly; and a humbling pastoral conference with Willard plunged her into melancholy. Prout clung steadfastly to her exacting meditations, heartfelt prayers, and private devotions. The Bible remained her constant companion through each exhausting cycle, as she drew encouragement from well-known passages that provided incentives to close with the church. And

⁹The Old South Church required candidates for full membership to submit these brief autobiographical testimonies until 1769. Several Old South Church relations dating to the second half of the eighteenth century survive, for which see Hill’s *History of the Old South Church*, 1:309 n. 1, 2:95; *The Papers of Robert Treat Paine*, ed. Stephen T. Riley and Edward W. Hanson (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1992), p. 48; and my “New Perspectives on the Northampton Communion Controversy II: Relations, Professions, & Experiences, 1748–1760,” *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 4.1 (2014): 115, 136–37. Most extant Congregational church admission testimonies are found among the church records and personal papers of ministers who docketed and preserved them for posterity, but scattered evidence indicates that lay men and women such as Prout may have retained copies for their personal use. See, e.g., Jason Haven, *A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of Mrs. Hannah Richards, of Dedham* (Boston: Richard Draper, 1770), p. 388. For a contemporary example of copying a church admission testimony into a personal journal, see “The Commonplace Book of Joseph Green (1675–1715),” ed. Samuel Eliot Morison, in vol. 34 of *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1943), pp. 241–44.

so Prout's pilgrimage might have ended on 4 October 1702, when she summoned the courage to seek the public ordinance of the Lord's Supper and joined the Old South Church in full communion (pp. 1–4 [408–411]).¹⁰

An odd disjunction occurred between the first entry in the journal and the second (II), which was written as Prout was nearing the end of her first pregnancy during the summer of 1709. Unlike her relation, which chronicled her adolescent quest for assurance of salvation, here the journal suddenly veered off in a new direction. "The Saturday before the sacrament," Prout announced, "I determin'd to set apart for self-examination meditation & prayer, one part of the day, & I hope I did beg of god that he would of his mercy give me his holy spirit to help me in this great work." Preparing to receive the sacrament, a common theme in New England devotional journals composed at the turn of the eighteenth century, was a duty that many lay men and women approached with great trepidation. Citing the words of 1 Corinthians 11:29, church members, especially new communicants, worried that they might eat and drink their own damnation if they appeared at the Lord's table unworthily.¹¹ In this case, however, the "great work" upon which Prout meditated involved a more immediate threat than the eternal judgment of her soul: the impending birth of her first child. Plagued by a dread of death during her first pregnancy, she turned to devotional disciplines to alleviate her anxieties. Meditating on the Bible once again sustained her hope, as Prout contemplated trusting words from Psalm 9:10. Several days later she received the Lord's Supper and noted a twofold "design" in attending the sacrament. Like many participants, she hoped to experience "communion" with Christ, and yet she also believed that partaking of his body and

¹⁰Hamilton Andrews Hill and George Frederick Bigelow, *An Historical Catalogue of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston, 1669–1882* (Boston: David Clapp and Son, 1883), p. 22.

¹¹Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, pp. 156–60; Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall, "Family Strategies and Religious Practice: Baptism and the Lord's Supper in Early New England," in *Lived Religion in America*, pp. 56–57. For statistical evidence of the laity's pervasive fear of the Lord's Supper, see my "Gendered 'Relations' in Haverhill, Massachusetts, 1719–1742," in *In Our Own Words*, pp. 67–70.

blood might assuage her fears of death in travail. Preparation for the Lord's Supper thus subsumed both soteriological and practical concerns, as she prayed that God would "clothe me with the white robe of christ's righteousness" and "give me a safe deliverance" (pp. 4–6 [411–412]).

Prout's first child—one of three infants eventually named for their grandmother, Elizabeth Scottow¹²—lived only four months. Returning to her journal as her second pregnancy drew to a close a year later (III), the distressed young mother worried that "god would heat the furnace seven times hotter by reason of my sins." Prout once again acknowledged being "full of fears," and she repeated her practice of observing a day of private ritual fasting and meditation. This time she prayed that God would bless the "fruit of my womb," "deliver me in due time with safety," and "bless our family & dwell in it & that I may have a holy seed to serve him." Concern for the well-being of her unborn child, in turn, quickly led to confusion as she wondered whether her protective prayers were lawful. Perhaps she had uttered them "in my own strength" (pp. 7–8 [413–414]).

A short while later, safely delivered of a healthy son, whom she and her husband named Timothy (1st), Prout expressed joy and relief. For the first time, she had experienced the blessings of what she called the "prayer hearing god." Recalling the event in a third undated journal entry (IV), she spoke of being "encourag'd to hope in god by reason of his goodness to me in carrying me thro the dangers of travail" (p. 8 [414]). Prout had discovered that God listened to her prayers and that her devotional routines might play an important role in protecting her family if only she approached them with a contrite heart. At the same time, she understood that she walked a fine theological line. The means of grace were not automatically efficacious; nor did her diligent pursuit of the practices of piety accrue to her any merit or render her soul any less odious in God's

¹²On the practice of "necronymic succession" in early New England, see Daniel Scott Smith's "Child Naming Practices, Kinship Ties, and Change in Family Attitudes in Hingham, Massachusetts, 1641 to 1880," *Journal of Social History* 18 (Spring 1985): 546–47.

sight. Still, somewhere in the back of her mind, Prout began to entertain the notion that a well-organized prayer, a disciplined meditation, a carefully studied Bible, or a lengthy journal entry might keep her children alive.

Prout's meditation ended on a high note. Once again she recalled comforting texts from John 16:24 and Isaiah 59:21 in which God promised to uphold his covenant with the faithful. "O how sweet have these words been to me many a time after my Childs death for myself & seed," she declared. But Prout also vented misgivings about her ability to cope with her recent afflictions. "I hope, I desire," she wrote just a few lines earlier with some hesitation, "to be what god would have me to be, & not to have one murmuring or discontented tho't at his providence to me but be willing to bear what he shall see meet to call [me] to here in this world." In a frank admission, the young mother acknowledged for the first time the ominous thoughts that occasionally crept into her mind during her private devotions. "But oh! What reason have I to Lament my coldness, & dulness, & deadness in duty. When I would fain be in the Mount with god then I have such straying thoughts which makes me very uneasy & know not what to do" (pp. 8–9 [414–415]).

Chronicling events over more than a decade, Prout's church admission testimony and the the first three undated entries in her devotional journal (I–IV) spanned an important life-course threshold. The pious adolescent seeking earnestly after grace had matured into a concerned mother burdened by temporal anxieties. Parenthood brought her face-to-face with providential hardship, perhaps for the first time. Indeed, Prout's decision to begin keeping a devotional journal may have reflected the challenges of her new family situation. On its pages she would struggle to decipher the hidden meanings of God's divinely appointed afflictions.



"June 8th [1712]. I set apart a day to seek unto God for his blessing on me & my seed & to examine the state of my

soul.” In this meditation, the first dated entry in Lydia Prout’s journal (V), the young mother’s thoughts ran first to her physical health and then to the safety of her family. “I was very much afraid of death,” she wrote as she neared the end of her third pregnancy, and “I went to God to beg of him that he would make me willing to be at his disposal & that Death might not be such a terror to me.” Reflecting on Psalm 147:11, she rested content for a moment in the notion that God took pleasure in “them that fear him.” Later that day, the visiting minister John Whiting of Concord buoyed her spirits with an inspired sermon in which he “mightily encourag’d” the Old South congregants to strive after divine blessings. As her day of devotions drew to a close, Prout decided to renew her covenant with God. This private ritual mirrored the increasingly elaborate covenant renewal ceremonies that many Congregational churches began to observe during the last quarter of the seventeenth century.¹³ “Oh that I may live as one devoted to his service,” she wrote in her journal, “that I may never give way to any discouraging thoughts.” Drawing her son Timothy (1st) close, she likewise dedicated the toddler and her “unborn seed” to divine service, begging “heartily of God to accept them for his own names sake, that he would never leave them to themselves” (pp. 9–10 [415–416]).

Sabbath worship, private meditation, Bible study, covenant renewal, journal writing—puritan devotional practices figured prominently in Prout’s brief meditation. The words she penned on that spring day, however, diverged both in tone and emphasis from the introspective writings of an earlier generation of New England diarists who explored the intricacies of conversion in their devotional writings. Prout was more concerned about safeguarding her beloved family than discovering assurances of salvation. Seven months into her third pregnancy, she appealed to God to protect her children during the troubling weeks that lay ahead.

¹³On public covenant renewal ceremonies, see David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), pp. 243–44, and Richard P. Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, & the Godly: The Reformation of Manners in Orthodox New England, 1679–1749* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p. 38.

Prout had come of age in an era of acute demographic uncertainty. Previous generations of New Englanders had generally enjoyed robust health. Initially isolated from global patterns of disease exchange and settled by relatively youthful, well-nourished families, the insular farming towns and small seaport communities of eastern Massachusetts maintained impressively low background morbidity levels during the first five decades of settlement. These very same factors, however, also created the conditions for devastating epidemics of smallpox, measles, and diphtheria to sweep through immunologically naive communities. By the turn of the eighteenth century, intensifying population densities, proliferating settlements, burgeoning transatlantic trade networks, and escalating warfare on the northern frontier increasingly placed once-isolated New England towns in routine contact with dangerous pathogens. Periods of heightened mortality were common, especially in emergent mercantile centers such as Boston. In fact, Prout suffered through several epidemiological crises during her adolescent and early parenting years, including a virulent measles outbreak in 1713 that pushed the annual death rate in Boston to European levels for the first time in the town's history.¹⁴

Unpredictable surges in illness and death preyed upon the minds of parents as never before during these turbulent decades. From published broadside elegies and newspaper obituaries to the progressively more elaborate funerary customs and gravestone iconographies that took shape during the latter decades of the 1600s, risk perception matched, and may even have outpaced, demographic reality in what was fast becoming a society obsessed with temporal misfortunes. Even the rise of family portraiture among elite Boston clans such as the Prouts and Savages signaled parents' desperate desire to make permanent the images of their all-too-fleeting

¹⁴Mary J. Dobson, "Mortality Gradients and Disease Exchanges: Comparisons from Old England and Colonial America," *Social History of Medicine* 2 (1989): 259–97; Philip J. Greven Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 185–97; John B. Blake, *Public Health in the Town of Boston, 1630–1822* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 247–48.



FIG. 2.—*Margaret Savage* (1698–1785), oil on canvas, 66.7 × 54 cm. Artist unknown, ca. 1710. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.



FIG. 3.—*Thomas Savage Jr.* (1703–13), oil on canvas, 66.7 × 54 cm. Artist unknown, ca. 1710. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

By the time the unidentified “Savage Limner” painted these pendant portraits of Lydia Prout’s niece and nephew, their parents—Thomas and Margaret Savage—had buried four of their seven children. Thomas Jr.—the third son to bear his father’s name—died during a virulent measles epidemic that struck Boston in 1713. See Lawrence Park, “Old Boston Families Number Three: The Savage Family,” *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 67 (July 1913): 210–11.

children (see, e.g., figs. 2–3). Salem merchant John Gardner spoke for many of his generation when he explained in a 1717 autobiographical memoir that he had met with “nue Cares and nue Dutis” when he “Changed” his “Condisson from A Singel to A marr[i]ed State.”¹⁵ For many provincial men and

¹⁵John Gardner, *Journal, 1717–1718*, 2 vols., 1:3, box 7, Thomas Wren Ward Papers, 1717–1943, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Daniel Scott Smith and J. David Hacker, “Cultural Demography: New England Deaths and the Puritan Perception of Risk,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 26 (Winter 1996): 367–92. On the elaboration of rituals involving death at the turn of the eighteenth century, see Peter Benes, *The Masks of Orthodoxy: Folk Gravestone Carving in Plymouth County, Massachusetts, 1689–1805* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), pp. 33–56; David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 96–134; Gordon E. Geddes, *Welcome Joy: Death in Puritan New England* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1981), pp. 102–53; Stephen C. Messer, “Loud Sermons in the Press: The Reporting of Death in Early Massachusetts Newspapers,” *Massachusetts Historical Journal* 17 (1989): 38–51; Steven C. Bullock and Sheila McIntyre, “The Handsome

women, family formation brought unrelenting afflictions and calamities—events that awakened young parents from the care-free spiritual slumbers of adolescence.

Congregational clergymen responded to the mounting demographic challenges by delivering sermons in which they exhorted their parishioners to sanctify family afflictions for their spiritual good. In a typical example preached in March 1708, Old South minister Ebenezer Pemberton explained to his parishioners, including Prout—then in the second trimester of her first pregnancy—that scripture provided comfort to the “Children of God” in times of suffering. “This world is an afflicted world,” Pemberton acknowledged, and “God is the author of all afflictions.” This seemingly somber pronouncement sounded, however, a message of hope for the faithful, since “God doth all things in wisdom.” Pemberton maintained that God aggrieved his children only when “they stand in need of it.” Bodily disorders were actually signs of divine favor, since God only “scourges” those whom he “receives” (Heb. 12:6). Citing the patient and pious examples of Job and Lazarus, Pemberton concluded that affliction provided a propitious occasion for laboring saints to “grow in grace” and “attain Everlasting happiness.”¹⁶

Prout would have heard or read scores of similar discourses during her adult years. Published jeremiads, funeral elegies, devotional tracts, and ordinary sermons converged on a uniform theology of affliction that described sin as a palpable, physical contagion that sickened bodies as well as souls. Among the

Tokens of a Funeral: Glove-Giving and the Large Funeral in Eighteenth-Century New England,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 69 (2012): 305–46; Steven C. Bullock, “Often concerned in funerals’: Ritual, Material Culture, and the Large Funeral in the Age of Samuel Sewall,” in *New Views of New England: Studies in Material and Visual Culture, 1680–1830*, vol. 82 of *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, ed. Martha J. McNamara and Georgia B. Barnhill (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2012), pp. 181–211. For the relationship between death and family portraiture, see Lillian B. Miller, “The Puritan Portrait: Its Function in Old and New England,” in *Seventeenth-Century New England*, vol. 63 of *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, ed. David D. Hall and David Grayson Allen (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984), pp. 168–70.

¹⁶Hugh Hall, Sermon Notebook, 3 February–13 March 1709, pp. 1–3, Hugh Hall Papers, 1709–1774, Massachusetts Historical Society.

most poignant representatives of the genre was Cotton Mather's evocatively titled treatise *Insanabilia*. Published shortly after the 1713 measles epidemic, it included an extensive "Catalogue of Incurables" or "personal Calamities," that plagued the "Children of Men" during their pilgrimage through the "First Adams World." Mather dismissed the notion that sudden deaths, bodily infirmities, accidents, financial reversals, and family tumults were the result of "meer *Chance*." Sin lay at the root of all affliction: "'Tis to Chastise us for our *Sin*, that the *Justice* of Heaven dispences to us all our *Grievous Things*." Temporal calamities were incurable, Mather asserted, but they might heal the soul if sufferers confessed their sins and attended to their public and private devotional duties. Thus, Mather challenged his audience to "Read a Lesson out of *Job*" and improve God's remarkable providences through prayer and meditation, thereby transmuting divine chastisement into spiritual gain.¹⁷

Judging from extant devotional writings composed between 1680 and 1740, many lay men and women heeded their ministers' advice and intensified their religious practices when faced with providential adversity. Elderly diarists and pious adolescents may have wrangled over the state of their souls, but during the early years of family formation, most parents dedicated their occasional writing activities to making sense of life-course events. Joseph Green, the young minister of Salem Village, for example, restricted the notations in his commonplace book almost entirely to meditations on family crises during the decade following his marriage. Similar concerns figured prominently in the devotional writings of Cape Cod deacon John Paine, tanner Joshua Lane of Hampton, New Hampshire, and merchant Daniel King of Marblehead. In one of the few self-reflective entries in Lawrence Hammond's diary, the Charlestown civil magistrate recounted a string of family afflictions, including the deaths of three wives and six children. Hammond deployed the powerful words of Job 1:21 to give voice to his emotional

¹⁷Cotton Mather, *Insanabilia: An Essay upon Incurables* (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1714), pp. 5-7, 9, 22-26.

trauma: "The Lord gives, & the Lord takes; blessed be the name of the Lord."¹⁸

Anxious parents believed that their measured devotional disciplines played an important role in maintaining the health and safety of their families. Indeed, provincial New Englanders were committed to a wide range of protective faith-healing strategies. Collective rituals of fasting and thanksgiving countered outbreaks of epidemic disease, Indian raids, droughts, and natural disasters. Families hoping that the prayer-hearing God would protect and heal new mothers and ailing family members submitted small slips of paper, known as prayer notes or bills, for their ministers to read during public worship exercises. During the first decade of the eighteenth century, parents in towns across eastern Massachusetts began appealing to their ministers for a special dispensation to present their sick and dying children for private baptism. In some parishes, more than half of all church admission narratives penned by or on behalf of married men and women cited the awakening impact of bereavement or illness on the candidate's decision to close with the church. Among those whom God had been pleased to afflict with sickness or injury, half had uttered private vows in which they pledged to join the church if raised to health again.¹⁹

¹⁸"Commonplace Book of Joseph Green," pp. 249–53; "Deacon John Paine's Journal," in *Mayflower Descendant* 8 (July 1906): 180–84, 8 (October 1906): 227–31, 9 (January 1907): 49–51, 9 (April 1907): 97–99, and 9 (July 1907): 136–40; Joshua Lane, *Journal, 1727–1755*, ser. 1, box 1, Lane Family Papers, 1727–1924, New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord, N.H.; Daniel King, *Diary, 1730–1767*, photostat, Massachusetts Historical Society; "Diary of Lawrence Hammond," ed. Samuel A. Green, *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 2nd ser., 7 (January 1892): 151. The meditations on temporal concerns that figure prominently in these works diverge in striking ways from those of two of Prout's Boston contemporaries: the young Harvard student (and Prout's future minister), Joseph Sewall, and the elderly North End artisan John Barnard. The diaries that these two men wrote early and late in their lives reflected a greater preoccupation with more traditional issues relating to the puritan quest for assurance of salvation than the examples cited above. Cf. Bruce Tucker, "Joseph Sewall's Diary and the Rhythm of Puritan Spirituality," *Early American Literature* 22 (Spring 1987): 3–18, and Seeman, *Pious Persuasions*, pp. 15–43.

¹⁹Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, pp. 196–204; my "The Newbury Prayer Bill Hoax: Devotion and Deception in New England's Era of Great Awakenings," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 14 (2012): 57–59; E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New*

The differing experiences of men and women conditioned their religious responses to pain and illness. Hardships affecting men came at irregular intervals—a mill accident, an epidemic, a military campaign, a business reversal—but women suffered the trauma of childbirth every twenty months, on average, during their reproductive years. Although statistically infrequent, the prospect of dying during labor, widely broadcast as it was in the image of mother and child entombed together, weighed heavily on the minds of all New England goodwives.²⁰ Maternal mortality also afforded ministers a grim symbol for theological reflection. Several prominent Boston clergymen endorsed childbirth as an important edifying event in a woman's life. Cotton Mather, for example, in his catalogue of incurable afflictions, singled out the grievous “Yoke” God placed upon women, as recounted in Genesis; and yet Eve's curse might turn into a blessing if only pregnant women would “look up to a dear Saviour” in their moments of distress and endure hardship with meekness, patience, and humility. “The Approach of their *Travails*,” Mather wrote in a 1710 pamphlet addressed to midwives, “proves to them an Occasion and an Excitement for those Exercises of *Piety*, that Secure to them, and prepare them for, Eternal *Blessedness*; and they may Say, *Tis Good for me that I have been Afflicted*” (Ps. 119:31). Capitalizing on pregnant women's pervasive fears of death in childbirth, Mather invited them to consider their own demise. “For ought you know, your *Death* has entred into you,” he warned, “and you may have conceived That which determines but about Nine Months more at the most, for you to Live in the World.” The Boston divine advocated observing a battery of rituals in anticipation of the lying-in period that followed a successful delivery. The “main Provision” of these childbirth devotions was to prepare the mother's soul for impending judgment should the

England, 1570–1720 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 192; my “Religious Experiences in New England,” in *Modern Christianity to 1900*, ed. Amanda Porterfield, vol. 6 of *A People's History of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 223–24.

²⁰Smith and Hacker, “Cultural Demography,” pp. 380–83.

worst befall her before, during, or immediately after her travail. A woman's "*Pregnant Time*," Mather concluded, "should be above all a *Praying Time*."²¹

Dread of childbirth dominated the devotional writings of provincial women. Five months pregnant, Cotton Mather's sister Jerusha Oliver wrote in her diary that she was "much afraid of Death, and therefore afraid what will be the issue of my being with Child." Accordingly, she bolstered her devotional routines in the weeks prior to travail, hoping that she might "obtain the victory over Death, & over my fears of Death." Boston minister Benjamin Colman's daughter, Jane Turell, raised a special prayer of thanksgiving after God "appear'd for me in such an Hour of Distress and Danger" when she was obliged to deliver her child on her own. Worried that she would die suddenly during her impending labor, Sarah Goodhue of Ipswich penned a secret letter to her family and friends in which she exhorted them to improve upon her experiences and prepare for their own deaths. An unusual narrative written by Martha Coit in 1688 listed more than three dozen scriptural verses upon which she actively meditated while in labor. Over the course of two decades and ten pregnancies—including a breeched delivery and three stillbirths—Coit learned to "trust in the lord at all times." Her frank admission that God had delivered her in "Childe bareing" indicates that she envisioned her devotional exercises as a technique for coping with bodily indispositions and afflictions. In each of these cases, the cadence of women's literary activities reinforced the close correspondence between reproductive concerns and the practices of piety.²²

²¹Mather, *Insanabilia*, p. 43; Cotton Mather, *Elizabeth in Her Holy Retirement: An Essay to Prepare a Pious Woman for Her Lying In* (Boston: Bartholomew Green, 1710), pp. 2, 6–7, 15, 22.

²²Cotton Mather, *Memorials of Early Piety: Occurring in the Holy Life & Joyful Death of Mrs. Jerusha Oliver* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1711), p. 28; Benjamin Colman, *Reliquiæ Turellæ, et Lachrymæ Paternæ: The Father's Tears over his Daughter's Remains* (Boston: Samuel Kneeland and Timothy Green, 1735), pp. 102–3; Sarah Goodhue, "A Valedictory and Monitory Writing," in *Puritans in the New World: A Critical Anthology*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 181–87; Coughlin, *One Colonial Woman's World*, p. 41. Martha (Harris) Coit was the mother-in-law of the early diarist Mehetabel (Chandler) Coit, Prout's contemporary.

During the weeks following a successful delivery, many young mothers watched in horror as, at an appalling rate, their newborns suffered and died. Of all children born in eighteenth-century New England, 10 to 30 percent died within a year. Even modest death rates, when coupled with the extraordinarily high birth rates of provincial women, meant that most mothers would bury at least one child.²³ The regularity with which women confronted affliction—in their pregnancies and deliveries as well as at their children's bedsides—goes a long way toward explaining a widely observed trend: the predominance of married women among the ranks of full church members. More than two thirds of all New Englanders presenting themselves for candidacy during the six decades that preceded the Whitefieldian revivals of the 1740s were married women with young children. The trend was universal, affecting churches from downeast Maine to southern Connecticut.

Pious goodwives took the lead in affiliating with New England churches for a variety of reasons, not least of which was to express thanks to God for a safe delivery. "It seems that the *Curse* in the Difficulties both of *Subjection* and of *Childbearing*, which the *Female Sex* is doom'd unto," Mather claimed, "has been turn'd into a *Blessing*." If the "*Chains*," "*Pains*," and "*Deaths*" attending childbirth did not convince them of their duty to join the church and participate in the Lord's Supper, the imperatives of family life soon persuaded mothers to set aside their anxieties. Timorous, lax, or hyperscrupulous husbands could afford to hang back from the communion table for fear of eating and drinking their own damnation. No such option was readily available for godly matrons responsible for protecting their children. Indeed, many mothers early in the eighteenth century sought the privileges of church membership as part of a broader family strategy designed to safeguard the health and temporal welfare of their young children through

²³Maris A. Vinovskis, "Angels' Heads and Weeping Willows: Death in Early America," in *Religion, Family and the Life Course: Explorations in the Social History of Early America*, ed. Gerald F. Moran and Vinovskis (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 215.

the sacrament of baptism. As one New Hampshire man summarized at mid-century: “God saith that the Children of Righteous upon the account of their parent have no more cause to hope for being Saved . . . than the Children of Wicked but God reward[s] the Children of the Righteous often times on account of their Parents tho’ not Eternal Salvation yet with thee good things of this Life.”²⁴

Anne Bradstreet reflected on these emerging trends in female piety with greater clarity than most seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century New Englanders. While the publication of *The Tenth Muse* in 1650 earned her critical fame and notoriety on both sides of the Atlantic, Bradstreet is perhaps best remembered for the intimate verses and prose meditations she inscribed in a private devotional journal that her children subsequently copied for their own religious edification. Nearly all of the more than two dozen entries in her Andover Manuscript focused on improving temporal afflictions, including her frequent fainting spells and periods of bodily indisposition, the grief and anxiety she experienced during her husband’s transatlantic travels, and, most famously, the conflagration that destroyed her house in 1666. Considering her sinful nature, Bradstreet “expected correction” from God’s rod during her “weary pilgrimage” through the “wilderness of this world.” The many periods in which she suffered illness or “losses in estate” were, she wrote, the “times of my greatest getting and advantage.” As Bradstreet explained in a 1656 meditation composed after a period of “sickness and weakness,” pain and loss were “best for me, for God doth not afflict willingly, nor take delight in grieving the children of men; He hath no benefit by my adversity,

²⁴Cotton Mather, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion: Or the Character and Happiness of a Vertuous Woman* (Cambridge, Mass.: Samuel Green and Bartholomew Green, 1692), p. 45; [Emily Hoffman Gilman], ed., *A Family History in Letters and Documents, 1667–1837* (St. Paul, Minn.: Privately Printed, 1919), p. 62. For church affiliation statistics, see Gerald F. Moran, “‘Sisters’ in Christ: Women and the Church in Seventeenth-Century New England,” in *Religion, Family and the Life Course*, pp. 85–90. On church affiliation as a protective ritual involving the health and prosperity of the family, see Brown and Hall, “Family Strategies and Religious Practice,” pp. 41–68, and David D. Hall, “Puritanism’s Progress from ‘Religion and Society’ to Practices: The New Religious History,” in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 155–56.

nor is He the better for my prosperity, but He doth it for my advantage, and that I may be a gainer by it." In fact, Bradstreet prayed frequently that her broken body might become a "vessel fit for His use." "The Lord knows I dare not desire that health that sometimes I have had," she asserted, "lest my heart should be drawn from Him, and set upon the world."²⁵

Bradstreet was a pioneer, both as a female poet and as a devout mother who adapted the puritan theology of affliction to suit the difficult demands of family life. She filled her journal with homely metaphors of Christian children weaned from their worldly appetites by "wormwood or mustard," ground like corn with "grief and pain," "harrowed" by God's "plough of correction," and toughened through winter seasons of adversity. Copying her didactic poems and meditations for personal contemplation and preserving them for posterity, Bradstreet's children positioned their godly mother in the vanguard of a generation of virtuous women whom ministers memorialized in scores of sermons, broadside elegies, and gravestone epitaphs by the time Lydia Prout was born. Still, there was one crucial difference between the two women: Bradstreet never lost a child. "I have not been refined in the furnace of affliction as some have been," she admitted in a 1657 meditation, "but have rather been preserved with sugar than brine."²⁶



Lydia Prout neglected her journal for two and a half years after the birth of her third child. Then, in the winter of 1715, she put pen to paper once more. Six months earlier, during the summer of 1714, her daughter, Elizabeth (2nd), died just a few weeks before her second birthday. Doubling Prout's calamity, her mother quickly followed her granddaughter, and namesake,

²⁵*The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 242, 245, 254–55, 276.

²⁶Bradstreet, *Works*, pp. 257, 274–75, 279, 285. For Bradstreet's children, see William Richard Cutter, *Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of Boston and Eastern Massachusetts*, 4 vols. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1908), 1:125.

to the grave. In her meditation of 12 February 1715 (VI), Prout, now in the third trimester of her fourth pregnancy, let loose the anguish of a young mother torn between duty and desire. "I have set apart this day to cry unto the Lord that he would disclose himself unto me," Prout began defiantly, "& shew me for what he has been so terribly afflicting me in the removing of one of my Children & my mother. I found the afflictions so heavy that I could not tell what to do. I was extremely afraid of dishonouring God by my unruly passion" (p. 10 [416]).

Prout vacillated between bitterness and resignation in this, the second dated entry in her journal. For a moment, she summoned the courage to assume responsibility for her recent bereavements. Uncertain whether the temporal judgments were "sent to make me better or worse," she hoped that God "meant it for good & to let me see more vanity in the world & to see more beauty in himself." Then she lapsed back into her frame disaffected, admitting that "I find sin very strong in me & Satan very ready to set in with his temptations to hinder me in duty & discourage me from trust in God." Drawing upon the comforting words of Job 13:15 and Hebrews 12:6, which regularly appeared in her ministers' sermons, Prout again prayed for the strength to persevere. "I thought I could be contented to bear the affliction," she acknowledged, "if I might but glorify God thereby." And yet, as she approached her next childbirth travail, she was "full of doubts & fears about death" as well as worries that she might leave her "seed" motherless (pp. 10–11 [416–417]).

With an emotional storm raging within her, Prout clung doggedly to her refuge in the Lord alone. The meditation closed on a positive note as, for this first time in her life, she took the unusual step of drafting and initialing a personal religious covenant.²⁷ "I call heaven & Earth to record this day that I do here take the lord Jehovah father Son & holy Ghost for my Portion & Cheif good & do give up myself Body &

²⁷Composing a personal religious covenant was an uncommon practice among Prout's contemporaries. For one elaborate example, see *Papers Composed and Wrote by Samuel Prince* [n.p.: n.p., 1800–1899?], Andover Library, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass.

soul for thy service promising & vowing to serve thee in holiness and righteousness all the days of my life by thy grace strengthening me." Prout had faced down Satan's temptations, but the deaths of Elizabeth (2nd) and her mother had stretched her disciplined piety to the breaking point and unleashed her "unruly passion" (p. 11 [417]).

Prout's desperate desire for a healthy family had run headlong into the puritan theology of affliction. In a brief burst of writing several weeks later (VII–VIII), Prout struggled and ultimately succeeded in sanctifying her experiences. "I cannot but set down god's goodness to me," she wrote following a dangerous illness that coincided with the seemingly providential delivery of her fourth child, Lydia (1st). Only after she had been "wonderffully carried" through her difficult childbirth travail and "recover'd strength," to the astonishment of her "Friends" and physicians, did Prout finally "desire to bless God" for her afflictions (p. 12 [418–423]).

Like many of her contemporaries, the beleaguered Boston gentlewoman believed that her rigorous devotional disciplines played an important role in preserving the health of her body and of her family. But what happened when these protective rituals failed? The deaths of Prout's children sorely taxed her ability to reconcile the practices of piety with her faith in God's retributive justice. Frequently she admitted distractions, bitter thoughts, temptations, and spiritual lassitude, and her ardent lamentations about her spiritual failings mingled uneasily with hopeful longings for health, prosperity, and, perhaps, divine grace. She undoubtedly took heed of the Boston ministers' sermons on affliction—especially Mather's *Insanabilia*, which was published within months of the deaths of her mother and daughter—and yet she was often unable to keep her mind from straying toward discontented thoughts.

Reformed clergymen recognized that even the most devout saints would encounter temptation during their uneven pilgrimage through the wilderness of earthly tribulation. English parents on both sides of the Atlantic struggled to resign themselves to the will of God in the face of family misfortunes. Bereavements of all kinds ranked third among the various factors that

mentally disturbed patients of Richard Napier, the seventeenth-century East Anglian physician, reported as having triggered their illnesses. Nearly half of these cases involved the deaths of children, and, overwhelmingly, those who reported suffering mental distress were grieving mothers. Prominent English diarists, including the pious artisan Nehemiah Wallington and puritan minister Ralph Josselin, candidly acknowledged their inability to endure affliction with equanimity. In New England, as early as 1643, Governor John Winthrop reported the sad death of a “worldly,” “stubborn and self-willed” Roxbury servant who had fallen into despair following a stillborn delivery.²⁸

Steeped in English Protestant traditions of “cheerful suffering,” which drew upon literary models ranging from John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* to popular wonder lore, provincial New Englanders knew the roles to which they had been assigned in the “theatre of God’s judgments.” Still, a deep ambivalence runs through their diaries, letters, and devotional writings. Indeed, there is something perhaps too insistent in the words of Prout’s childhood neighbor Mary Bonner, who, as she languished on her deathbed in 1697 beset, as she said, by the devil’s temptation, proclaimed to the assembled mourners that “I have no hard thoughts of god that my afflictions are Greate.” “I never did once murmur against God,” minister Joseph Green noted with apparent confidence after his wife delivered a stillborn son in 1701. Green’s family prospered during the next decade, as God regularly “appeared for us in the mount of difficulty,” “heard our prayers,” and “pityed & spared us” through childbirth travails, illnesses, and life-threatening accidents; and yet the young minister continued to worry that he did not meet affliction with a proper resignation. “I had so often experienced Gods Goodness,” Green admitted shortly after his wife’s eighth

²⁸Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 72–85; Alan Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin, a Seventeenth-Century Clergyman: An Essay in Historical Anthropology* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 163–82; Paul S. Seaver, *Wallington’s World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1985), pp. 86–91; *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649*, ed. Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 425.

successful delivery in 1713, that “I was ashamed to distrust & to be fearfull.” Following the dual deaths of her husband and son-in-law in 1703, Elizabeth Chandler of New London, Connecticut, commanded her daughters to “patiently & quietly submit to the “will of god in every thing.” For a brief moment at the end of her letter, however, she admitted to being “under much grief when I write.” Martha Coit, too, was frequently besieged by “soar temptations” when “god dealt hardly” with her during difficult pregnancies, although she ultimately recognized that it was her duty to improve her childbirth experiences and “hope in his mercy.”²⁹

Others were less certain. Anne Bradstreet wrote openly about her predisposition to “repine” at God’s providential corrections. Her frequent meditations on affliction reveal that she was perplexed by emotional “sinkings” and “droopings” and plagued by blasphemous and atheistical thoughts, many of which she attributed to Satan’s interventions. When three grandchildren died prematurely, Bradstreet penned a series of complex elegies in which she vented her frustration with God’s “bitter crosses,” while at the same time she redirected her conflicted emotions toward didactic ends. Cape Cod deacon John Paine also bore the “awfull Stroakes of the rod of god upon me” with

²⁹Adrian Chastain Weimer, *Martyrs’ Mirror and Holiness in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 16; Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 65; “The Deuil Came Upon me Like a Lyon’: A 1697 Cambridge Deathbed Narrative,” ed. Robert F. Trent, *Bulletin of the Connecticut Historical Society* 48 (Summer 1983): 119; “Commonplace Book of Joseph Green,” pp. 250–53; Elizabeth Chandler to Mehetabel and Sarah Coit, 12 June 1703, Gilman Family Papers, 1659–1935, MS 240, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn.; Coughlin, *One Colonial Woman’s World*, pp. 42, 44. My argument here and in the paragraphs that follow builds upon Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 132–39, and Gloria L. Main, *Peoples of a Spacious Land: Families and Cultures in Colonial New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 110–16. Both of these studies provide important correctives to earlier scholarship that emphasized the practices through which parents created emotional distance from their children and prepared for their deaths through various forms of “anticipatory mourning.” Cf. David E. Stannard, “Death and the Puritan Child,” *American Quarterly* 26 (December 1974): 466–68, and Peter G. Slater, “From the *Cradle* to the *Coffin*: Parental Bereavement and the Shadow of Infant Damnation in Puritan Society,” in *Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective*, ed. N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 32–35 (quotation p. 33).

great difficulty following the untimely deaths of two brothers and a cherished son, who had been “Staved to pieces” during a whaling expedition. “O cruel Death,” the despairing father complained upon hearing the black news; “why couldst thou not have Seized on Some older infirm person whose life is Even a burden to them Selves.” In the remaining lines of his journal entry, Paine did his best to draw benefit from his afflictions, but his sorrow was overwhelming. Three months later he acknowledged with “heavy heart” that the passing of his “lovly Son” was “hard to bear.” Even Prout’s prominent contemporaries—fellow Old South parishioner Samuel Sewall and cross-town luminary Cotton Mather—struggled to master immodest grief, although they were seldom frank about the matter in their diaries.³⁰

The tension between the literary figure of the “truly virtuous and praiseworthy” woman and the experiences of provincial mothers is nowhere better exemplified than in the case of Mary Hinckley. In 1703, her third husband, Thomas, former governor of Plymouth Colony, memorialized his wife in a long manuscript elegy. Mary rose early for her closet devotions, studied her Bible, prayed, meditated, and led her children in family devotions; she “prized a *Gospel Ministry*” and contributed liberally to charitable causes. Thomas commended his wife especially for behaving “wisely in a perfect way, / Both in the brightest and the darkest Day.” Throughout the painful

³⁰Bradstreet, *Works*, pp. 235–37, 243, 249; Randall R. Mawer, “Farewel Dear Babe: Bradstreet’s Elegy for Elizabeth,” in *Critical Essays on Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Patricia Cowell and Ann Stanford (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), pp. 205–17; “Deacon John Paine’s Journal,” *Mayflower Descendant* 9 (April 1907): 98–99, 136. For Sewall’s and Mather’s struggles, see Marion Nelson Winship, “Safety and Danger in a Puritan Home: Life in the Hull-Sewall House, 1676–1717,” in *The American Home: Material Culture, Domestic Space, and Family Life*, ed. Eleanor McD. Thompson (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998), pp. 257–71; Judith Graham, *Puritan Family Life: The Diary of Samuel Sewall* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), pp. 99–108; and N. Ray Hiner, “Cotton Mather and His Children: The Evolution of a Parent Educator, 1686–1728,” in *Regulated Children/Liberated Children: Education in Psychohistorical Perspective*, ed. Barbara Finkelstein (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1979), pp. 24–43, and Hiner, “Cotton Mather and His Female Children: Notes on the Relationship between Private Experience and Public Thought,” *Journal of Psychohistory* 13 (1985): 33–49.

final weeks of her life, she never uttered a “murmuring” or “impatient word” but, instead, stood in “meek submission” to God’s will and “Resigned to Him whom she beheld in Faith.”³¹

This loving portrait of a stoic wife, however, contrasted sharply with the figure described in a stern letter from Plymouth minister John Cotton Jr. two decades earlier. Only two of the eleven children of Mary Hinckley’s two previous marriages had died prematurely, but the first seven children born to her eldest daughter succumbed to infant diseases. Following the death of one grandchild in her Barnstable home in December 1683, Hinckley became “deeply dejected,” and Cotton wrote to “allay that excessive grief that hath taken hold of you.” “You have lost a dear grandchild by an ordinary disease,” he chided. “What is there in this more than the common portion of the children of men—yea, and of the children of God?” Hinckley had not been the “first afflicted in this kind.” Cotton’s own mother had lost a favored grandchild “on whom her heart was exceedingly set.” In both cases, he continued, “God hath done what is done, and He did you no wrong.” Temporal corrections signified God’s “fatherly love to your soul.” Cotton urged Hinckley to consider how God had been working to inure her to worldly desires by sending affliction into her extended family. Overvaluing her progeny had, in fact, provoked such “Weaning dispensations.” An unruly child of God like Hinckley “needed this Affliction” to foster her “spirituall good.”³²

For all of the aforementioned individuals, and for their neighbors as well, patient resignation to God’s will was never easily accomplished. And yet provincial ministers rebuked women for unrestrained sorrow more frequently than men. Indeed, the category of immodest grief was itself coded as feminine.

³¹Amos Otis, *Genealogical Notes of Barnstable Families: Being a Reprint of the Amos Otis Papers, Originally Published in the “Barnstable Patriot,”* rev. C. F. Swift, 2 vols. (Barnstable, Mass.: F. B. and F. P. Goss, 1888–1890), 2:34; “Governor Hinckley’s Verses on the Death of His Second Consort,” *New England Historic Genealogical Register* 1 (January 1847): 93.

³²*The Correspondence of John Cotton Junior*, ed. Sheila McIntyre and Len Travers, vol. 79 of *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2009), p. 297.

Examining the question of how the afflicted were expected to bear “*Griefs* that can’t be *Cured*,” Cotton Mather exhorted readers of *Insanabilia* to carry themselves “Decently” and “Discreetly,” with “due *Patience*” and “Lovely *Submission*.” “You must not be *Passionate*, Outrageous, [or] Tempestuous under your *Grievous Things*,” he explained. Every Christian pilgrim was a “*Cross-bearer*”; thus, it was necessary for the children of God to suffer willingly under the lash of affliction without “Murmuring.” Unbridled passions and overwrought emotions troubled early Anglo-American conceptions of masculinity, which prized the virtues of rationality, moderation, and self-control. Not surprisingly, then, Mather exhorted those experiencing insufferable bereavements to exhibit “the Vigour of *Manly Christianity*” and behave “*Stoutly*” and “*Manfully*” during times of divinely appointed tribulation.³³

Stories of divine retribution meted out upon discontented mothers circulated in parishes throughout New England. Prout undoubtedly would have been familiar with Increase Mather’s funeral elegy for his wife, who died during the spring of 1714. Toward the end of his aptly titled *A Sermon Concerning Obedience & Resignation to the Will of God in Every Thing*, the elder Mather expanded on the dangers of maternal disobedience as he related a harrowing anecdote about a pregnant woman who idolized her youngest child. When the child contracted smallpox, the mother appealed to local clergymen to observe a day of prayer and fasting. During the bedside vigil, one of the ministers prayed for the mother to submit to God’s will, even if it meant accepting the death of her child. “Her unruly Passion was such,” Mather wrote, using the same phrase that Prout inscribed in her journal just a few months later following the deaths of her mother and daughter, “that she interrupted him in his Prayer, and said, *If He will Take him away; Nay, He shall then Tear him away whether I will or no.*” As a result of her disobedience, Mather concluded, the child died and the

³³Mather, *Insanabilia*, pp. 29–31, 34, 36. For ideals of masculinity, see Ann S. Lombard, *Making Manhood: Growing Up Male in Colonial New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 8–9.

woman's next pregnancy ended in the death of both mother and infant.³⁴

Similar didactic lessons were delivered in *Early Piety: Exemplified in Elizabeth Butcher of Boston*, a pamphlet published two years after Prout recorded the final entry in her devotional journal. Elizabeth, the eight-year-old daughter of Old South Church parishioners, was one of New England's celebrated models of precocious piety. Devoted to God while still in her mother's womb, she listened eagerly to weekly sermons and, by the tender age of six, was climbing into bed with her catechism, reading the works of the Mathers, and discoursing with adults on complex theological issues and the state of her soul. During the winter of 1716, she contracted a "remarkable Illness" that eventuated in her death two years later. When minister Joseph Sewall inquired whether she was "willing humbly to submit to the Will of God," Butcher unhesitatingly answered in the affirmative. Overhearing two visiting neighbors declare that "this Child has been a Child of affliction all its Days," she calmly replied, "it is for my Good." Hers was an exemplary death. In her final days, Butcher prayed not to be spared from her illness but for "a saving knowledge of Christ, that God wou'd please to pardon all my Sins and prepare me for Death my great & last Change." Everyone in the Old South community would have agreed with Sewall, who wrote in his preface that Butcher was "justly recon'd" one of God's "happy number."³⁵

Embedded within the joyous account of Butcher's final days lay a warning to young mothers who allowed grief and bitterness to overwhelm their resignation to divinely appointed afflictions. Elizabeth Butcher Sr. appeared occasionally in the pamphlet, and in several cases the weeping mother was chastised by her pious daughter. "Dear Mother, you make me have more Pain," the ailing youth bemoaned when she spied her

³⁴Increase Mather, *A Sermon Concerning Obedience & Resignation to the Will of God in Every Thing* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1714), pp. 34–35.

³⁵Joseph Sewall, *Early Piety: Exemplified in Elizabeth Butcher of Boston*, 3d ed. (Boston: Samuel Kneeland, 1725), pp. ii, 5–6, 16–17. On the publication history of this pamphlet, see Mark A. Peterson, *The Price of Redemption: The Spiritual Economy of Puritan New England* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 92–95.

namesake crying. During her final illness, she offered pious exhortations, telling Elizabeth Sr. that if she “did but taste and feel what I do, you would long to be gone.” And in her last moments, the precocious child warned her mother that she, too, would soon pass from the earth. For young parents, Sewall’s instructive intent was unmistakable. The death of a saintly child was, in the words of Psalm 116:15, precious in the sight of the Lord. Parents should not grieve for their temporal losses but, instead, prepare their own souls for the inevitable family dissolution that was to come.³⁶

Early eighteenth-century church admission narratives indicate that women, especially, took to heart their ministers’ moralizing set pieces. During the same years in which Prout struggled to cope with her incessant family traumas, Abigail Lovel explained to the church in Medfield that God had been striving to awaken her to her Christian duty by removing a beloved child who “took too much roome in my heart.” Burdened by extreme sorrow, she failed to acknowledge God’s mercy in delivering her during a subsequent childbirth, and this omission, Lovel lamented, “provoked god to come wit[h] another stroke.” She was visited with illness, and her newborn died as a result of her spiritual inattention. Elizabeth Page of Haverhill also admitted that she had “walked contrary to a child of god under his affliction hand” during her husband’s long years of illness. Neglecting family prayers and occasionally drinking to excess exacerbated her trials, as God saw fit to “tacke away my husband by the stroke of death” in retribution for her moral and devotional lapses. Both women joined the church in the hope of averting future temporal judgments.³⁷

Two decades earlier, Nathaniel and Mary Brown of Rowley recalled a similar sequence of events. Both spouses described youthful religious convictions that quickly wore away, only to

³⁶Sewall, *Early Piety*, pp. 5, 13, 17.

³⁷My “‘Gendered’ Relations in Haverhill,” pp. 67–68; Relation of Abigail Lovel, 8 April 1711, Miscellaneous Church Records, Medfield Historical Society, Medfield, Mass.; Relation of Elizabeth Page, 28 March 1725, Haverhill, Mass., First Congregational Church Records, 1719–2012, box 1, Congregational Library, Boston (available online at <http://www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/main>).

be renewed after they grew to adulthood and started a family. God's chastening rod fell heavily upon the young couple several years later, when their second son died in 1688. The Browns understood that their sins had caused God to remove their child, but instead of reforming, they "grew careless agen as to Religion." Then, during in the fall of 1692, the entire family was struck down by an unspecified illness. Although Nathaniel quickly regained his health, Mary lay close to death for weeks, and her infant daughter died shortly after birth. Reflecting on those difficult months, Mary interpreted her child's demise as a loud call to "serve god," and yet she frankly confessed that she "wanted a heart" to do so. It was "a dark time," she reported in her church admission narrative. "I thought god was angry with me."³⁸

Mary elevated her devotional practices for a brief period after she was restored to health. She began studying her Bible in earnest, was "constant in secret worship," and briefly entertained the notion of "attending the Lords supper." Although God had made their duties clear to them, the Browns nonetheless delayed their decision to join the Rowley church for another seven years. They presented themselves for admission to full communion several weeks after the death of a third child during the spring of 1699. "In the time of my last affliction," Mary remembered, "I was much afraid that I had angered god by my sin & sloth." In words that mirrored the plaintive language that Prout would later use to describe the events that precipitated her dreadfulest thought, Brown desired "the Lord to show me whereof he was contending with me, & those sins that had provoked him most."³⁹



Tormented by the physical and emotional hardships of child-bearing and by recurrent bereavements, Lydia Prout often found it difficult to banish the seductive temptations that crept

³⁸Relations of Nathaniel and Mary Brown, 18 and 26 April 1699, Mss C 52 and C 77, NEHGS.

³⁹Relations of Nathaniel and Mary Brown, 18 and 26 April 1699.

into her consciousness, temptations that promised physical ease and family security. At times, she seemed willing to do virtually anything to better her situation—even if, in her words, it meant “dishonouring god.” Prout knew from listening to the Boston clergy’s sermons and reading their various treatises on virtuous womanhood that divine affliction required patient resignation to the will of God. Still, ministers such as Ebenezer Pemberton recognized that many bereaved parents readily fell into doubt, melancholy, and dissatisfaction, saying to themselves the “Lords Greives why should I trust longer in the Lord?”⁴⁰ Prout attributed her disordered thoughts and “unruly passion” to the fiery darts of Satan. The devil appeared at several points in the early, undated portion of her journal and figured prominently in the final entry, in which she encountered her “dreadfullest thought” while she mourned the death of her two children. What was the connection?

Ministers and lay people in New England believed that men and women who expressed impatience while suffering affliction exposed themselves not only to divine wrath but to the snares of Satan as well. “Down right *Witchcraft*,” Cotton Mather once explained, was often the “up-shot” of a “Frame of *Discontent*.” Those who were “alwaies murmuring and repining at the Providence of God” invited Satan to approach them for “an *Agreement*.” Deodat Lawson warned the people of Salem Village during the early weeks of the 1692 witchcraft outbreak that by “*giving way unto sinful and unruly Passions*” sinners exposed themselves “to letting in *Satan* and his *Temptations*.” Prout’s minister, Samuel Willard, explained to the Old South congregation later that fateful summer that Satan “always sutes the temptation to the present Inclination” of the sinner.⁴¹ Relentlessly spiteful and cunning, the devil preyed upon people’s

⁴⁰Hall, Sermon Notebook, p. 2.

⁴¹Cotton Mather, “A Discourse on Witchcraft,” in *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions* (Boston: R. P., 1689), p. 23; Deodat Lawson, *Christ’s Fidelity the Only Shield against Satans Malignity* (Boston: Benjamin Harris, 1692), p. 61; Mark A. Peterson, “‘Ordinary’ Preaching and the Interpretation of the Salem Witchcraft Crisis by the Boston Clergy,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 129 (January 1993): 100. My argument here follows that of Elizabeth Reis, in her *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), esp. pp. 59–62.

particular fears and desires. To impoverished female servants, he offered fine clothes and a reprieve from the drudgery of daily labor; to aspiring yeoman, he promised fertile land and the abatement of debts; to hopeful saints, he extended a false assurance of salvation. And to grieving mothers, he vowed he would resurrect their dead children.

Appearing sporadically in Anglo-American witchcraft cases before 1660, reports of Satan tempting bereft mothers increased during the same period that witnessed the rise of puritan prescriptive literature on female virtue. No court documents survive from the mid-century case of executed witch Alice Lake, for example, although later writers remembered her as a harlot and murderess. In a 1684 letter to his brother Increase, however, Nathaniel Mather suggested that Lake had succumbed to Satan's temptations after he appeared to her in the "likeness and acting the part of a child of hers then lately dead on whom her heart was much set." Beverly minister John Hale offered a similar revisionist reading of the infamous case of Hugh and Mary Parsons of Springfield. The colorful 1651 affair involved bizarre reports of enchanted puddings and spectral dogs. Although the magistrates acquitted both spouses of witchcraft, Mary was subsequently convicted of infanticide and sentenced to death. Summarizing the Parsonses' case a half century later in his 1702 treatise *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*, Hale ignored the court's verdict and carefully excised all exotic details. Instead, he emphasized the fact that Mary Parsons "had lost a child and was exceedingly discontented at it, and longed; Oh that she might see her child again!" Desperate to alleviate her grief, the Springfield matron succumbed to the temptations of Satan, who appeared to her in the "likeness of her child." The unholy covenant was sealed, Hale concluded, when Parsons received the devil into her bed.⁴²

⁴²David D. Hall, ed., *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History, 1638–1693*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), pp. 28, 31–32. For a similar example, see Malcolm Gaskill, "Witchcraft and Power in Early Modern England: The Case of Margaret Moore," in *Women, Crime, and the Courts in Early Modern England*, ed. Jenny Kermode and Garthine Walker (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 132–33.

The specter of maternal discontent loomed even larger during the Salem witch hunt. More than thirty people confessed to covenanting with Satan during the summer of 1692. Three quarters of the confessors were women, half of whom were either married or widowed, and nearly all of them hailed from the small farming village of Andover.⁴³ The motives that prompted their extraordinary testimonies were complex. Some of the women collapsed under the relentless accusations of neighbors, magistrates, and family members; others artfully sought to prolong their lives by capitulating to the demands of the judges; and a few developed elaborate fantasies in which they conflated common sins with diabolism. Together the Salem confessions provide rare insight into the collective imagination of lay men and women and offer a detailed portrait of the devil and a catalogue of his temptations.⁴⁴ In an unprecedented outpouring of self-recrimination, the accused women disclosed their innermost anxieties and most desperate desires. In several notable cases, the fantastical confessions that they related to the Salem judges involved shedding the constraints of maternal virtue their families, neighbors, and ministers had fashioned for them.

Confessing witches testified to participating in events that parodied emerging standards of virtuous motherhood. At a time when women were signing church covenants in historic numbers, the Salem confessors claimed to have set their hands to

⁴³Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 238–42. On the Andover phase of the Salem witch hunt, see Chadwick Hansen, "Andover Witchcraft and the Causes of the Salem Witchcraft Trials," in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 38–57, and Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), chap. 7.

⁴⁴My interpretation of the Andover confessions draws upon the approach of European historian Lyndal Roper, who explores the "creative work" through which the accused "used the elements of their culture to create narratives" that "made sense of their lives" and translated their "life experiences into the language of the diabolic." The elaborate "fantasies" that women narrated in their confessions, Roper concludes, constituted a kind of "diabolic theatre" that revealed "shared cultural preoccupations" (*Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* [New York: Routledge, 1994], p. 20). Hall in his *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, pp. 144–47, 192–94, Godbeer, in his *Devil's Dominion*, pp. 210–11, and Reis, in her *Damned Women*, pp. 120–63, offer similar interpretations of the Salem confessions.

the devil's book. Prospective communicants described themselves as brides of Christ; witches were chained to Satan "body & soul." Godly mothers led their families in church affiliation, secured the right to have their children baptized, and were responsible for educating and raising their sons and daughters in the gospel "land of light"; the confessors, by contrast, claimed to have gathered deep in the forest to worship Satan under the cover of darkness. They enticed their children to attend the witches' sabbat, renounce their baptisms, and accuse family members as co-conspirators in Satan's grand plot to overthrow New England's gathered churches of visible saints. Whereas ministers glorified women's domestic sphere in their sacramental sermons, witches celebrated communal meals that mocked the Lord's Supper. During the Salem trials, maternal discontent threatened to erupt into outright rebellion.⁴⁵

Andover minister Francis Dane believed that "strange breaches in families" lay at the root of his parish's unusually virulent witchcraft outbreak, although he appeared not to have fully recognized the demographic roots of the devil's conspiracy.⁴⁶ Statistically, women who claimed to have covenanted with Satan during the Salem trials had experienced a greater incidence of bereavement than their neighbors (see table). Of the nineteen married confessors for whom genealogical records allow full family reconstitution, eight had lost more than one third of their children prior to 1692. Seven had suffered through the deaths of their precious first- or second-born sons or daughters, many of whom bore the names of their parents.⁴⁷ The average

⁴⁵Bernard Rosenthal et al., eds., *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 547–48, 553–54, 559–60, 608–9. Cf. Margaret W. Masson, "The Typology of the Female as a Model for the Regenerate: Puritan Preaching, 1690–1730," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2 (Winter 1976): 304–15; Amanda Porterfield, *Female Piety in Puritan New England: The Emergence of Religious Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 143–53; Richard Godbeer, "Love Raptures: Marital, Romantic, and Erotic Images of Jesus Christ in Puritan New England, 1670–1730," *New England Quarterly* 68 (September 1995): 355–84; and my "'Gendered' Relations in Haverhill," pp. 64–65.

⁴⁶*Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, p. 734.

⁴⁷Gloria Main has argued that "Naming the first born for oneself or one's spouse was a way to claim an inherited right to divine protection for one's children. . . . The practice became well established before New England's troubled time in the

TABLE
AGE AT DEATH: CHILDREN OF SALEM CONFESSORS AND
ANDOVER FAMILIES COMPARED

Age at Death	Salem Confessors ^a (b. through 1692)		All Andover Families ^b (b. 1670–1699)	
	N	%	N	%
0–1	22	19.5	59	15.3
2–19	17	15.0	28	7.2
20 and over	74	65.5	300	77.5
Total	113	100.0	387	100.0

^aData includes the children of Abigail Barker, Hannah Bromage, Deliverance Dane, Rebecca Eames, Martha Emerson, Abigail Faulkner Sr., Ann Foster, Eunice Frye, Deliverance Hobbs, Elizabeth Johnson Sr., Rebecca Johnson, Mary Lacey Sr., Mary Marston, Mary Osgood, Mary Taylor, Mary Toothaker, Mary Tyler, Sarah Wardwell, and Sarah Wilson Sr.; and excludes, due to incomplete vital or genealogical data, the families of Mary Bridges Sr., Candy, Dorcas Hoar, and Tituba. For lists of married women who confessed during the Salem trials, see Marilynne K. Roach's "Biographical Notes," in Bernard Rosenthal et al., eds., *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 925–64; Richard Weisman's *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in 17th-Century Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), pp. 217–18; and Richard Godbeer's *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 238–42. Family reconstitution relies on multiple sources, including the published Massachusetts vital records series; Enders A. Robinson's *Salem Witchcraft and Hawthorne's "House of the Seven Gables"* (Bowie, Md.: Heritage Books, 1992); Shawn Lynch's "Our Sinne of Ignorance": *Andover in 1692* (Andover, Mass.: Andover Historical Society and North Andover Historical Society, 1992); and various online, published, and unpublished genealogies, especially those of Charlotte Helen Abbott (available online at <http://www.mhl.org/andover/abbott/>).

^bAndover data adapted from Philip J. Greven Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 108.

size of their completed families (6.8) tended to be smaller than that of the typical Andover household (8.7), and yet married witchcraft confessors buried more children. The survival rate among this afflicted cohort of families was 689 in 1,000, a far cry from the robust figure of 830 in the population at large. Overall, more than one third of the 113 children born to witchcraft confessors prior to 1692 died before the age of twenty, as opposed to 22.5 percent among all Andover families between 1670 and

final quarter of the seventeenth century" ("Naming Children in Early New England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22 [Summer 1996]: 12).

1699. Perhaps most ominous of all, the widows and mothers who confessed to witchcraft during the Salem trials had lost more than twice as many young children and youths as their kin and neighbors.

Several confessing women associated their decision to sign the devil's book with difficult pregnancies, repeated child fatalities, or other family crises or transitions. By 1692, Hannah Bromage of Haverhill had lost all three children born during her first marriage; unresolved grief may, in part, have prompted her frank admission that the "devil was in her heart." Imprisoned Andover resident Mary Osgood reluctantly admitted to Increase Mather that she had covenanted with Satan "about twelve years before" when she fell into a "fitt of sicknesse" following the birth and sudden death of her last child. Osgood had been fortunate throughout her early parenting years, but three of her four youngest children had died prematurely, and she had grown despondent. Childless for three years following her marriage in 1689, Mary Marston finally gave birth to a daughter during the opening weeks of the Salem trials. Less than five months later, she confessed to afflicting several young women in Andover by spectral means. Marston initially claimed to have first encountered Satan during the final months of her pregnancy earlier that winter, but then she asserted that the "black man" had first appeared to her "about the tyme when her mother dyed and she was overcome with melancholly." Eventually, Marston settled on the year of her marriage as the time in which she signed the devil's book. Asked how long she had "ben a witch," Marston's neighbor Elizabeth Johnson also cited crucial life-course events. "She knew nott," Johnson maintained, "butt She was 30 Years old when She was Married." When pressed by the magistrates for more detail, Johnson asserted that the devil first appeared to her following the birth of her third child in 1666, a year that marked the halfway point in a decade during which she had buried four infants.⁴⁸

Witchcraft confessors maintained that Satan had promised them prosperity and happiness. For Andover's yeoman farmers,

⁴⁸*Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, pp. 490, 565, 569, 693.

aspirations for the good life involved productive farms, military commissions, and longevity; for anxious goodwives, they centered on the health and security of their families, as Billerica's Mary Toothaker noted in her extraordinary examination testimony. Over the course of more than two decades, she had suffered through the deaths of three of her eight children, including her firstborn son, Nathaniel, who died in 1683 at the age of seventeen. Like her kin and neighbors in nearby Andover, Toothaker experienced "great Discontentednes" as a result. She worried that she had not improved her religious upbringing and infant baptism "as she ought to have done." Toothaker confessed that her devotional practices frequently led not to communion with the divine but to dramatic confrontations with Satan, whom she envisioned in the form of a "Tawny" Native American. On one of these occasions, she yielded to the devil's advances. In return for Toothaker's pledge to "praise him with her whole hart," Satan agreed to protect her from Indian raids that were devastating the northern frontier during the 1690s and promised that she would "have happy dayes" with her deceased eldest son.⁴⁹

Toothaker's examination revealed in graphic detail how Satan preyed upon the grief of bereaved mothers. Set apart from tales of neighborhood maleficia or assaults by the spectres of the accused, the lore of witchcraft and diabolism in early modern Anglo-America was a system of knowledge that provided ordinary people means for identifying, categorizing, and describing the sources of their adversities. It offered an alternative etiology of sickness, death, and other temporal afflictions—one that shifted the blame for their sufferings from their own sinful

⁴⁹*Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, pp. 467, 493, 561–62, 565, 569, 576. Genealogical information on the Toothaker family may be found in Henry A. Hazen, *History of Billerica, Massachusetts, with a Genealogical Register* (Boston: A. Williams and Co., 1883), pp. 149–50 of the genealogical section. My interpretation of Toothaker's cryptic statement turns on the singular form of the word "Son." In 1692, Toothaker had three living sons, including Allen (b. 1670), Roger (b. 1672), and Andrew (b. 1679). For another plausible reading of Toothaker's confession involving her second son, Allen, who was wounded during King William's War and later testified in the Salem trials, see Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, pp. 239–41.

souls onto Satan himself.⁵⁰ Prout, too, may have entertained the devil's temptations as a blasphemous, yet powerful, conceptual alternative to the constraints of the puritan theology of affliction and the prescriptive ideal of the virtuous woman. Might her "dreadfullest thought" have been to renounce the covenant with God that she had inscribed in her journal but a year earlier and pledge herself to Satan's service? Did she, like Toothaker and Mary Parsons of Springfield, imagine that the devil had offered to resurrect her dead children in exchange for marking his book with her blood?

Several factors support the hypothesis that Prout's "dreadfullest thought" derived from the same diabolic fantasies of maternal rebellion that had fueled the testimonies of confessed witches during the Salem trials. An impressionable six years old in 1692, she may have recalled the uproar in the Old South congregation over events in Salem Village. Her minister, moreover, was a veteran of the cosmic war between God and his fallen angels. Two decades earlier, Samuel Willard had confronted the enemy face-to-face, as Satan spoke with "grum" voice through the mouth of the clergyman's possessed servant, Elizabeth Knapp. On that occasion, Willard exhorted his parishioners to consider the matter with caution and "reflect inward" on the collective sins that had conjured the devil in their community. He sounded a similar warning during the Salem trials. Even as he cast Satan in conventional terms as a roaring lion "always hungry after the so[u]les of men," Willard reiterated his belief that God had willingly unleashed the devil upon a sinful and unrepentant people. "We must acknowledge god to be the author" of the afflictions that plagued the young people of Salem Village, he argued. Such humbling providences demanded "selfe Examination," not public recrimination.⁵¹

⁵⁰Here, I seek to locate Prout's "dreadfullest thought" within the interpretive framework outlined by Godbeer in his *Devil's Dominion*, chap. 3. See also Stuart Clark's description of witchcraft as a "world of knowledge," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 115.

⁵¹*Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England*, p. 208; Samuel Willard, *Useful Instructions for a Professing People in Times of Great Security and Degeneracy*

That fateful summer, as Lydia Savage listened to Willard's weekly sermons from her father's pew in the back of the original, "Old Cedar" meetinghouse, she would have witnessed prominent Boston residents grappling with the complex theological issues the trials raised. There sat the powerful merchant Edward Bromfield, busily writing sermon notes as Willard preached. Across the meetinghouse, Thomas Brattle quietly gathered evidence for his powerful assault on the legal proceedings against self-professed witches. Five years later, the young woman sat across the aisle from Samuel Sewall as he stood in the meetinghouse, head bowed, and listened to Willard reading a prayer bill in which the judge renounced his role in the whole sordid affair. Sewall's statement drew directly upon the puritan theology of affliction. He interpreted the recent "strokes of God upon himself and family"—the deaths of his two-year-old daughter and his stillborn son—as punishment for the "Guilt contracted, upon the opening of the late Commission of Oyer and Terminer at Salem"; and he begged God to lift the retributive burden from his family and community.⁵²

A decade later, one year before Lydia Savage applied for the privileges of full church membership, Willard preached a sermon series later published under the title *The Christians Exercise by Satan's Temptations*. Once again, the Old South minister pressed his point regarding the devil's limited powers. Satan can "do nothing but under God's Permission," he insisted; temptations are preordained by God, who "*hath holy ends in suffering*." Although Satan certainly had a hand in such afflictions, Willard cautioned his auditors to regard the devil's role "warily." Too frequently, he complained, "There is a great noise and cry that some make, the Devil, the Devil, he hath tempted me, he was too sly and hard for me, and a great deal of anger seems to be vented upon him; and all this is but a cheat."

(Cambridge, Mass.: Samuel Green, 1673), p. 31; Peterson, "'Ordinary' Preaching," pp. 95, 99; Stephen L. Robbins, "Samuel Willard and the Spectres of God's Wrathful Lion," *New England Quarterly* 60 (1987): 598.

⁵²*Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:366–67. On Bromfield's sermon notes and Brattle's critique of the Salem trials, see Peterson, "'Ordinary' Preaching," pp. 87–88, and Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, pp. 281–83.

Such was often the case in situations of pain or bereavement, in which Satan “sollicits them to discontent, and murmuring at Gods Providence, and pusheth them on to cast off duty as a thing not profitable to them.”⁵³

Willard and Cotton Mather understood that the lives of even the most devout saints were constantly exposed to the temptations of Satan, especially during periods of affliction. Alluding to witchcraft in his 1713 *Insanabilia* treatise, Mather warned that when things were “out of Joint in our *Families*” and “*God* has laid on the *Grief*,” Satan often appeared to promise relief. The meditations Mather modeled for pregnant women confronted this dilemma directly. The “Devil demands me as his Captive; I am a Prey to the Terrible one,” he implored each expectant mother never to forget. Once they fully grasped that they were powerless to resist Satan’s allurements on their own, pregnant women would, he thought, be impelled to turn to Christ for saving grace. Willard may not have shared Mather’s belief in Satan’s seemingly unlimited powers of affliction, but he reached a similar conclusion in his 1701 sermon series. The real temptation, he argued, was blaming Satan rather than the corrupt human soul as the origin of pain and suffering. Ordained by God as a trial to test the faith of the godly, the devil’s temptations ultimately provided “*wonderfull proof of [God’s] universal Sovereignty and Government.*”⁵⁴

The Boston ministers were not, however, Prout’s only source of knowledge about the divine and diabolic calculus of temporal affliction. She descended from families with direct ties to four separate witchcraft incidents. Her maternal grandfather, Joshua Scottow, served as executor for the estate of condemned Boston witch Ann Hibbens, and he later apologized to the Massachusetts General Court for his outspoken criticism of the guilty verdict. He had arranged for George Burroughs, the convicted “Ring Leader” of the Salem conspiracy, to preach at

⁵³Samuel Willard, *The Christians Exercise by Satan’s Temptations* (Boston: Bartholomew Green and John Allen, 1701), pp. 2, 41, 49, 57, 114.

⁵⁴Mather, *Insanabilia*, pp. 24, 28; Mather, *Elizabeth in Her Holy Retirement*, pp. 10–11; Willard, *Christians Exercise by Satan’s Temptations*, p. 130; Godbeer, *Devil’s Dominion*, pp. 91–97.

his Maine plantation during the 1680s. Witnesses during the 1692 trials recalled that the notorious “wizzard” had performed preternatural feats of strength at Scottow’s Black Point garrison during the First Indian War two decades earlier. In addition, Prout’s paternal grandfather, Thomas Savage Sr., married the daughter of the infamous antinomian Anne Hutchinson who, although never prosecuted for witchcraft, embodied many of the traits associated with witches. Finally, Samuel Sewall noted in his diary that Timothy Prout’s grandmother died in 1694 “after sore conflicts of mind, not without suspicion of Witchcraft.”⁵⁵

Lydia Prout’s apparent willingness to conflate her dread-fullest thought with the devil’s darting temptations flew in the face of the lessons Willard preached from the Old South pulpit. By his standards, Prout was too quick to impugn Satan for her excessive grief; she ought, rather, to have looked into her own sinful heart to discover the root cause of both her children’s deaths and her discontentment. But in Prout’s mind, Willard’s sermons on the limited powers of Satan comported uneasily with the cumulative witchcraft lore of her extended family. To make sense of her repeated afflictions, she abandoned her minister’s finely wrought theological distinctions and entertained the alternative paradigm adopted by the accused women of Andover. However briefly, Prout chose rebellion over submission as the fitting course for expressing her maternal grief.



In that signal moment during the fall of 1716, when Satan crept into Lydia Prout’s closet while she was “in the mount with god,” the combined influences of cultural and religious authority fell upon the Boston gentlewoman with crushing force. Her sudden flirtation with the devil and his fiery darts, and with the liberating catharsis that those discontented thoughts implied,

⁵⁵W. B. Trask, ed., “Abstracts of the Earliest Wills on Record in the County of Suffolk,” *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 6 (July 1852): 283; *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England*, p. 89 n. 2; *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, pp. 243–44, 497, 647; Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare*, pp. 129, 143, 249–50; Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Vintage, 1987), pp. 14–19; Sewall, *Diary*, 1:317.

abruptly collapsed under the collective pressure of community expectations and ministerial injunctions. In time, Prout would only remember the brief encounter as her “dreadfullest thought.” Unlike confessing witches a generation earlier, she would find no release for the physical and emotional suffering she endured as a young mother. Together, the puritan theology of affliction and the literary ideal of the virtuous woman conspired to transform and feminize her ardent desire for a healthy family into an “unruly passion.”

Prout declined to indulge her brief fantasy of covenanting with Satan. Refusing to name her “dreadfullest thought” in her journal, she summoned the courage to dispel her melancholy and resist Satan’s advances. Through the ritual discipline of private writing, she vented her spiritual failings, temptations, and bitterness over the deaths of Timothy (1st) and Lydia (1st). Returning to her journal during the final weeks of her next pregnancy, Prout struggled to come to terms with the loss of her two children. And yet, by extending the final entry (IX) through the birth, illness, and recovery of her newborn daughter, Elizabeth (3rd), the following November, she ultimately succeeded in reinscribing the puritan theology of affliction on her own experiences, as she had done in the entries written after the deaths of Elizabeth (2nd) and her mother (VI–VIII). Read in its entirety, Prout’s journal appears to embody the consistent pattern of spirituality that is so often associated with the puritan morphology of conversion. Affliction bred discontent, and as these “murmuring thoughts” allowed Satan access to her mind, she was forced to confront the weakness of her faith and grope toward God in the hope that he might redeem her. Only after Prout had learned to accept her experiences as part of the divine plan, however, could she discern the “wonderfull goodness of God to me many a time both as to Soul & Body” (p. 15 [421]).

The distinctive phrasing of this final line in the journal reveals the prevailing rhetorical strategy through which devout women ultimately learned to cope with affliction. Prout’s words seem commonplace—even formulaic—by the standards of a devotional tradition steeped in wonders and remarkable providences. But a systematic study of imprints published in New

England prior to 1720 reveals few direct parallels.⁵⁶ The most intriguing of these analogues appears in the third “remove” of Mary Rowlandson’s popular *Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682), in which she described the traumatic death of her daughter after eight grueling days of captivity during King Philip’s War. When her Native American captors buried the child in an unmarked hillside grave, Rowlandson grew disconsolate: “my heart was even overwhelm’d with the thoughts of my condition.” But her captivity narrative, published several years later, emphasized the providential mercies that she received unexpectedly during these dark hours; and in one crucial passage, Rowlandson abruptly shifted the temporal frame in order to draw suitable lessons from her sufferings. “I have thought since of the “wonderfull goodness of God to me,” she reflected, “in preserving me in the use of my reason and senses, in that distressed time, that I did not use wicked and violent means to end my own miserable life.” Indeed, Rowlandson introduced similar retrospective asides throughout her narrative to reinforce the “wonderfull mercy” of God in carrying her through the many difficulties of her captivity.⁵⁷

The poignant rhetoric of Rowlandson’s best-selling captivity narrative may have inspired Prout’s “dreadfullest thought” journal entry thirty years later. Undoubtedly she would have seen her own painful parental experiences in the famed Indian captive’s concluding remarks: “The portion of some is to have their afflictions by drops, now one drop and then another; but

⁵⁶This observation is based on full text searches of the *Early English Books Online*, *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*, and *Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639–1800* databases for the phrase “wonderful goodness of god,” using variant spellings (“wonderfull,” etc.), truncated keywords (“wonderf*” and “goodn*”), and proximity operators (ADJ[x] and NEAR[x]). Although Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century publications is imperfect, I discovered only a handful of comparable references to “the wonderful *Goodness of GOD*.” One of the most notable examples appears in Cotton Mather’s well-known sermon on the redemption of the Barbary captives, *The Glory of Goodness: The Goodness of God Celebrated* (Boston: Timothy Green, 1703), p. 15.

⁵⁷*The Sovereignty and Goodness of God by Mary Rowlandson with Related Documents*, ed. Neal Salisbury (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1997), pp. 75–76; see also 82, 84, 107, 111. On the popularity, publication history, and reception of Rowlandson’s *Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, see Kathryn Zabelle Derouian, “The Publication, Promotion, and Distribution of Mary Rowlandson’s Indian Captivity Narrative in the Seventeenth Century,” *Early American Literature* 23.3 (1988): 239–61.

the dregs of the Cup, the Wine of astonishment: like a sweeping rain that leaveth no food, did the Lord prepare to be my portion. Affliction I wanted, and affliction I had, full measure (I thought) pressed down and running over.” Perhaps Prout embraced the moments of resistance that literary critics have detected within Rowlandson’s narrative, for a close reading of *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* reveals that the lash of God’s afflictive rod left permanent emotional scars. The restless cadence of the narrative, the author’s explicit identification with the forbidden desires of Lot’s wife, scriptural citations that disclosed her longing for her dead child’s restoration, and her incomplete reintegration into New England society following her redemption all hint at the possibility that Rowlandson never fully resigned herself to God’s will nor vanquished the bitterness that arose during her wilderness sojourn. Still, Rowlandson, like the poet Anne Bradstreet, offered her narrative as a testimony to God’s gracious dealings, and both women claimed that they had been “gainers” through their sufferings.⁵⁸

Time was the great alchemical agent of the puritans’ furnace of affliction. Only with the passage of time was Mary Rowlandson able to transmute the pain of her captivity into expressions of divine gratitude. A similar logic explains why funeral elegies never questioned the sanctity of the deceased, why, for example, Mary Hinckley could be upbraided for “excessive grief” in her lifetime yet eulogized in verse and stone as a “truly

⁵⁸Rowlandson, *Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, p. 112, and Bradstreet, *Works*, p. 254. Studies that emphasize a “clash of codes” within Rowlandson’s captivity narrative include Kathryn Zabelle Derounian, “Puritan Orthodoxy and the ‘Survivor Syndrome’ in Mary Rowlandson’s Indian Captivity Narrative,” *Early American Literature* 22 (Spring 1987): 82–93 (quotation p. 83), and Mitchell Robert Breitwieser, *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning: Religion, Grief, and Ethnology in Mary White Rowlandson’s Captivity Narrative* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 71–129. See also Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), chap. 4, and Porterfield’s *Female Piety in Puritan New England*, pp. 137–43. Alternative readings of Rowlandson’s captivity narrative that underscore continuities with “classic” patterns of puritan devotional discourse include Hambrick-Stowe’s *Practice of Piety*, pp. 256–65, and Hall’s *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, pp. 122–23, 126–27 (quotation). More recent studies, especially Teresa A. Toulouse’s *The Captive’s Position: Female Narrative, Male Identity, and Royal Authority in Colonial New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 21–44, emphasize the transatlantic political context in which Rowlandson’s book emerged.

virtuous and praiseworthy” woman after her death. Through the dim haze of memory, Martha Coit learned to “trust in thiss god” and “hope in his mercy” after a decade of enduring infant deaths and stillbirths.⁵⁹ And only the gap between the death of her two children in August 1716 and the restoration of her newborn several months later explains how Lydia Prout’s “dreadfullest thought” stood simultaneously as evidence of diabolic disobedience *and* the “wonderfull goodness of God.”

In the end, Rowlandson and Bradstreet seem more typically puritan in their devotional writing practices than Prout. This observation may reflect generic differences between the conscious artistry of poetry and captivity narratives, on the one hand, and the immediacy of devotional diaries, on the other. The former lie much closer to the heart of Reformed spirituality: an unceasing quest for authentic knowledge of divine election. Prout’s journal, by contrast, reveals the temporal concerns that dominated the religious lives of young parents in provincial New England. Although her meditations typically concluded with positive affirmations of hope in salvation, Prout at best lurched and groped toward grace. Her fears about the births and deaths of her children were never fully alleviated, her resentment never fully checked. Flowing just below the surface of her journal, an undercurrent of terror betrayed a desperate yearning to allay her grief and protect her family through whatever means possible, including, perhaps, the illicit powers of Satan. Virtuous female saints and damned witches haunted Prout’s mind, warring for her allegiance as she struggled to cope with the tragic events of her adult life.

A final irony lies in the commitment of Prout’s progeny to preserving her journal. Surviving only as a copy, the words “My Grandmother Prout” inscribed at the top of its first page, the manuscript was apparently passed down from generation to generation. Once an integral part of the Boston matron’s secret devotional routines, the journal became after her death a primer for the religious education of her descendants. Reviewing the cumulative arc of her religious experiences, Prout’s

⁵⁹Coughlin, *One Colonial Woman’s World*, p. 44.

grandchildren may have learned to model their own devotional practices after their venerable matriarch. Echoes of Prout's struggles to sanctify the deaths of her children may be found in the words "Memento Mori," which her grandchildren had inscribed on an unusual 1791 gravestone for their father, Joseph. Emblazoned with fruitful vines, hearts, and stylized soul effigies, the uncommonly large monument also memorialized three siblings who had died during the 1750s. Although we cannot know for certain, Lydia Cutler may have decided to transcribe the journal of "My Grandmother Prout" during the days following the death of her own infant in April 1808. Reflecting on that death in her commonplace book of religious memoranda, Cutler copied from a published anthology a poem that captured the fleeting life of her child in the morbid, first-person verse of an emerging Romantic era: "To the dark and silent Tomb / Soon I hasted from the womb."⁶⁰ Today, Lydia Prout's journal testifies to her family's sustained, disciplined piety, but a studied meditation on the author's "dreadfullest thought" exposes not puritanism's virtues but, rather, the dark side of a religious culture that persistently preyed upon the anxieties of young mothers, often denying them relief from the perils and pains of parenthood.

⁶⁰Lydia Cutler, *Religious Memoranda, 1790–1822*, entry dated 1 April 1808, Samuel Cutler Collection. For genealogical information on the families of Joseph Prout and Lydia Cutler, see Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout*, pp. 91–93. The literary source of Cutler's extract was Vicesimus Knox's edited anthology entitled *Elegant Extracts: Or Useful and Entertaining Pieces of Poetry Selected for the Improvement of Youth* (London: Charles Dilly, [1789]), p. 593. Gary Laderman examines the "morbid obsession" with tombs and the bodies of the deceased in his *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), esp. chap. 6. Joseph Prout's imposing, lichen-encrusted gravestone still stands in the Black Point Cemetery, Scarborough, Me.

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APPENDIX

THE JOURNAL OF LYDIA PROUT

EDITED BY DOUGLAS L. WINIARSKI

THE following annotated edition of Lydia Prout's devotional journal, which is owned by the New England Historic Genealogical Society in Boston, is printed here by permission.¹ The surviving manuscript is a late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century copy. Although no notes on the journal's provenance survive, strong evidence suggests that the copyist was the Boston gentlewoman's granddaughter Lydia (Prout) Cutler. In 1873, Cutler's son, Samuel Jr., the rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Hanover, Massachusetts, donated a collection of family papers to the New England Historic Genealogical Society; he later served as the Society's historiographer. Samuel Jr. appears to have composed the cover page that accompanies his mother's copy of the Prout journal as well as the last several leaves of the Cutler family Bible records that are also among the Society's collections.²

Born in 1769 and baptized in Boston's New North Church, Lydia Cutler was the daughter of Lydia and Timothy Prout's second surviving son, Timothy (2nd), and his second wife,

¹Journal of "My Grandmother Prout," 1714–1716, transcr. [Lydia Cutler], n.d. [ca. early nineteenth century], Mss A 8922, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston (hereafter NEHGS).

²Samuel Cutler Collection, 1782–1822, Spec. Col. 11 C 2, NEHGS; "Societies and Their Proceedings," *New England Historical Genealogical Register* 27 (April 1873): 200; *Memorial Biographies of the New-England Historic Genealogical Society*, vol. 7: 1871–1880 (Boston: NEHGS, 1907), pp. 378–79; Bible Record for the Samuel Cutler Family, 1637–1869, Mss C 3697, NEHGS. For a sample of Samuel Cutler Jr.'s handwriting, see his sermons among the St. Andrew's Church (Hanover, Mass.) Records, 1737–1979, box 7, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Composed on a ruled sheet of paper trimmed to the approximate size of the journal, Cutler's cover page reads: "Religious thoughts—1714, 1715, 1716 / Manuscript of (probably) Mrs. (Lydia) Prout wife of Timothy Prout / Timothy Prout died at Scarborough, ME, Aged 90 years April 4, 1768." The word "probably" was later cancelled in pencil.

Abigail Davenport. A 1741 Harvard graduate and prominent Boston merchant, the younger Timothy Prout was an outspoken loyalist who fled with his family to New York in 1776. In 1794, Lydia married a Newburyport merchant, insurance company president, and Episcopal vestryman named Samuel Cutler. They had four children, including an infant who died after only five days in April 1808. Cutler and her husband drowned during a coastal sailing voyage to Maine in 1832 and were buried at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Newburyport.³

The Prout journal comprises four leaves infolded to form a booklet measuring approximately 19 centimeters high by 11.5 centimeters wide. There is a small cutout on pages 3 and 4 that antedates Lydia Cutler's text. She numbered the pages of the resulting booklet in the upper right-hand corner and secured them with a pin. Lacking evidence from variations in ink color, penmanship, and other textual clues, it is difficult to date the individual entries of the original journal with precision. The dates supplied on Samuel Cutler Jr.'s cover page are inaccurate, as are several pencil notations in a later hand that appear sporadically throughout the text. Lydia Cutler created divisions in her manuscript copy by drawing a line to fill up the blank space at the end of each entry. Following her lead, I have identified nine discrete entries, marking each with a Roman numeral in the subsequent transcription and on the descriptive chart in the preceding essay. The four earliest entries are undated. Based on biblical quotations and distinctive phrasing, I believe that the first entry (I) is a copy of Prout's 1702 church admission testimony. Textual evidence indicates that she composed the next entry (II) near the end of her first pregnancy during the spring of 1709. Subsequent entries, several of which bear specific dates, cluster around the births of Timothy (1st) in October 1710 (III–IV), Elizabeth (2nd) in August 1712 (V),

³Dale Ellison Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout of Boston* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 2002), p. 91; Nahum S. Cutler, comp., *A Cutler Memorial and Genealogical History* (Greenfield, Mass.: E. A. Hall, 1889), pp. 365–66; Clifford K. Shipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates: Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College*, vol. 11: 1741–1745 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 56–58; Lydia Cutler, Religious Memoranda, 1790–1822, Samuel Cutler Collection.

and Lydia (1st) in March 1715 (VI–VIII). Entry VII appears to have been inserted out of chronological order, as it mentions Prout's daughter, who was born after the next dated entry (VIII). The final entry (IX), which contains the reference to Prout's "dreadfullest thought," is more complex. Dated 16 October 1716, it treats events from approximately August 1716 through, roughly, the end of that year.

In preparing Prout's journal for publication, I have followed the "inclusive" or "expanded" transcription method first developed by Samuel Eliot Morison and more recently described by Mary-Jo Kline.⁴ Capitalization and punctuation conform to, with only a few exceptions, Cutler's irregular style. Proper names and books of the Bible have been uniformly capitalized. Cutler used periods to mark pauses in the middle of sentences; I have transcribed them as commas. In a few cases where the copyist introduced only an open or close quotation mark, I have completed the pairing. Missing words and conjectural readings have been enclosed within square brackets. Cutler's original page numbers appear between slashes.



/1/ My Grandmother Prout

[I: ca. fall 1702]⁵ God has been pleased to let me see the miserable estate I was in by Nature. It was a very bitter thing unto me, & so I continued a great while under the burden of it upon my conscience, but god was pleas'd to bring this place of scripture unto my mind which was a great comfort to me "fear not I am with thee be not dismay'd I am thy God. I have stricken thee, yet will I uphold thee with the right hand of my

⁴Samuel Eliot Morison, "Care and Editing of Manuscripts," in the *Harvard Guide to American History*, ed. Frank Freidel, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 1:28–31; Mary-Jo Kline, *A Guide to Documentary Editing*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 157–58, 161–64.

⁵Prout (at the time, Lydia Savage) was admitted to full membership in Boston's Old South Church on 4 October 1702. See Hamilton Andrews Hill and George Frederick Bigelow, *An Historical Catalogue of the Old South Church (Third Church) Boston, 1669–1882* (Boston: David Clapp and Son, 1883), p. 22.

righteousness,"⁶ & this is another which was very sweet unto me "god has not appointed us unto wrath but to obtain salvation thro' our lord Jesus Christ."⁷ This place was a great comfort to me, but yet I continued under the burden of sin. Then that place came to my mind, which I was very much afraid I should not do, (if any one will be my desciple let him deny himself & take up his cross & follow me)⁸ knowing myself to be so weak in faith. I was afraid in time of temptation I should fall away. Then that place was a great comfort to me, come unto me all ye that labour & are heavy laden & I will give you rest.⁹ I thought I was willing to go to him & to accept of him on his own terms, to be my prophet preist & king, & to shelter myself under the shadow of his wings.¹⁰ One night being very melancholy, I thought I was not one of the elect but yet I thought I would seek unto him /2/ for he hath said I will be found of them that seek me early.¹¹ That put me upon seeking unto him. This place in Isaih was a sweet place unto me, he gathers the lambs

⁶Isa. 41:10. Prout's scriptural quotations occasionally deviate from the King James version of the Bible with which she would have been familiar. Typically, these deviations are minor, but in this case the difference is significant, as she substituted the phrase "I have stricken thee" for "I will strengthen thee."

⁷1 Thess. 5:9.

⁸Cf. Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23 Here and in the notes that follow, "cf." denotes scriptural allusions that Prout blended into her prose without identifying "that place" or "those words" from the Bible, as she does for direct quotations elsewhere in the journal. For a similar approach, see Michael J. Crawford, ed., "The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 33 (1976): 96 n. 12.

⁹Matt. 11:28. This text, along with Luke 22:19 and Isa. 1:18, which Prout cites later in this journal entry, consistently ranked among the most frequently cited biblical passages in early eighteenth-century church admission narratives. See my "Gendered 'Relations' in Haverhill, Massachusetts, 1719–1742," in *In Our Own Words: New England Diaries, 1600 to the Present*, vol. 1: *Diary Diversity, Coming of Age*, ed. Peter Benes, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, Annual Proceedings 2006/2007 (Boston: Boston University, 2009), pp. 73–74.

¹⁰Cf. Pss. 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, and 63:7. References to Jesus's three saving offices—prophet, priest, and king—appear with regularity in church admission narratives from the provincial era. For examples, see Kenneth P. Minkema, ed., "The Lynn End 'Earthquake' Relations of 1727," *New England Quarterly* 69 (September 1996): 486, and various relations among the Haverhill, Mass., First Congregational Church Records (available online at <http://www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/main>). For a general discussion of this theme in puritan theology, see David A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenantal Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 158–60.

¹¹Cf. Prov. 8:17.

in his arms & carry's them in his bosom & gently leads those that are with young,¹² tho' I did not know wether I was one of those he would carry in his bosom; & was very much afraid I did not love christ as I ought. I hope & pray that god would make me love him and more willing to accept him upon his own terms. Satan put me upon many fears & told me I had sinned away my day of grace, but these stuck unto me, fear not satan he shall do thee no harm.¹³ I hope I can say sin is the heaviest thing in the world. One day looking in my Bible, the first place I fix'd my eyes upon was what christ spake to his disciples do this in remembrance of me.¹⁴ It was so sweet! I thought he bid me do it in remembrance of him, but I fear hypocrisy in the heart. This place was a great comfort to me, the bruised reed shall he not break & smoaking flax shall he not quench till he send forth Judgment unto victory.¹⁵ I thought if I have but one spark of true grace in me he will not quench it. This was a great comfort to me. I was in fear I had none. Reading in a book that treats about hypocrisy that shows how far a hypocrite may go I thought I was a hypocrite¹⁶ & continued $\frac{1}{3}$ thus a great while. Then that place came to my mind they that wait upon the lord shall renew their strength they shall mount up like eagles they shall run & not be weary they shall walk & not faint.¹⁷ Then I was resolv'd with his strength to wait upon him that if I perish'd I might perish at his feet. Of his mercy I hope

¹²Isa. 40:11.

¹³This phrase does not appear in the Bible. Prout is likely referring to a sermon she had heard or a book she had read, such as Samuel Willard's *The Christians Exercise by Satans Temptations* (Boston: Bartholomew Green and John Allen, 1701), pp. 213-14.

¹⁴Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24.

¹⁵Matt. 12:20.

¹⁶Although it was likely published after Prout recorded this entry, see Benjamin Wadsworth's *The Danger of Hypocrisy* (Boston: Bartholomew Green, 1711). For an unpublished sermon on the same subject delivered a generation earlier by Old South minister Samuel Willard, see Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 8-9, n. 19.

¹⁷Isa. 40:31. Prout's evocative reference to perishing at the feet of Christ in the sentence that follows, although not found in the Bible, is typical of early eighteenth-century church admission narratives. For examples, see Minkema, ed., "Lynn End 'Earthquake' Relations," p. 488, and various relations among the Haverhill, Mass., First Congregational Church Records.

I can truly say that god has been at work upon my soul in that he has been letting me see my miserable estate I was in by Nature, & my own insufficiency to do any thing of myself, & the alsufficiency of christ & his willingness to save poor sinners that come unto him for he hath said come unto me all ye that are weary & heavy laden & I will give you rest. I hope I can say I am weary of my sins. I desire to be clothed with the garment of christ's righteousness.¹⁸ I have been under many fears on account of hypocracy in my heart but I have hear'd that no hypocrite could desire that god would save him, which I hope I can say is the sincerest desire of my soul. He has been pleased to send home that place tho' thy sins be as scarlet they shall be like snow tho' they be red like crimson they shall be as wool.¹⁹ /4/ I being very melancholy after I had spoken with Mr. Willard,²⁰ I was reading in Matthew where christ said of one that had not on a wedding garment he bids them cast him out into outer darkness where there shall be weeping & gnashing of teeth.²¹ I was afraid I had not on a wedding garment but thought I would go to god & beg of him that he would clothe me with the wedding garment which I hope he has clothed me withal. That place was sweet unto me, O let him take hold of my strength that he may make peace with me & he shall make peace with me.²²

[II: ca. spring 1709] The Saterdag before the sacrament, I determin'd to set apart for self-examination meditation & prayer,

¹⁸Cf. Isa. 61:10. Early eighteenth-century candidates for full church membership frequently described their desire to be metaphorically clothed with the white robes of Christ's righteousness or found wearing a wedding garment, as Prout does here, in the lines that follow, and later in this entry. For similar examples, see the Haverhill, Mass., First Congregational Church Records.

¹⁹Isa. 1:18.

²⁰Born in Concord, Mass., in 1640, Samuel Willard graduated from Harvard College in 1659, served as the minister at Groton, Mass., from 1663 to 1676, and was installed at Boston's Third, or "Old South," Church in 1678. At the turn of the eighteenth century, he was widely recognized as one of New England's most distinguished clergymen. He died in 1707. See Seymour Van Dyken, *Samuel Willard, 1640–1707: Preacher of Orthodoxy in an Era of Change* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), and Ernest Benson Lowrie, *The Shape of the Puritan Mind: The Thought of Samuel Willard* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1974).

²¹Matt. 22:12–13.

²²Isa. 27:5.

one part of the day, & I hope I did beg of god that he would of his mercy give me his holy spirit to help me in this great work for I did see that without his help I could do nothing. I was very much afraid I should set about it in my own strength & so should be deceiv'd at last. But he has promis'd to give his holy spirit to them that ask it.²³ I do think I put up that petition heartily; search me O God & try my heart prove me & know my thoughts and if there be any thing of sin in me discover it to me & lead me in the right way.²⁴ /5/ I was very melancholy at the thoughts of death. Satan did all he could to discourage me in my way to heaven. I begg'd strength of god to overcome his temptations, who I hope has answer'd me in some measure. I am always crying out Lord help me to beleive for I find it hard work to beleive. I have been concern'd about being with child²⁵ & sometimes very melancholy for fear I should dye to think what would become of me. Reading the last chapter of Revelations, where it is said the faithless & unbeleiving are to have their part among the Liers in hell,²⁶ & knowing myself to be full of doubts & fears I went to god that he would strengthen my faith & resolve my doubts & to let me see some more beauty in christ & the Joys of heaven. I hope I can truly say I desire to love god & christ above all things here in this world & to be willing to part with them all for him if he should call me to it, for Christ has said if we would be his disciples we must take up his cross & follow him. I begg'd of god that I might follow him closely all the days of my life. Reading the 9 Psalm 10 & they that know thy name shall put their trust in thee, for thou Lord hast not forsaken them that seek thee, when I was under the greatest fear I was resolv'd to seek to god for help against all my temptations & discouragements /6/ that I meet withal here in this world. I hope my design in going to the table of the lord is not out of any other ends but to glorify,

²³Cf. Luke 11:13.

²⁴Cf. Ps. 139:23–24.

²⁵Elizabeth (1st) Prout was born on 31 July 1709. See Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout*, p. 69.

²⁶Cf. Rev. 21:8.

to meet with christ, and to have communion with him, that my doubts may be resolv'd, my sins mortified my faith & other graces strengthen'd, & to this end I begg'd of God that he would clothe me with the white robe of christ's righteousness that I may be welcome to his Table. Drawing near my time to be delivered I was many times much afraid, but many times I met with comfort from god. I set apart the Saturday before the sacrament to seek unto god for his blessing on the fruit of my womb & that he would give me a safe deliverance of it, & I desire forever to bless his holy name for what I found that day. Hearing before that text "nevertheless I will be sought unto to do this for them,"²⁷ I was satisfy'd if I went to him asking in the name of christ he would not deny me, & I was very much encourag'd from those words which I found to be very sweet the same morning he shall call upon me & I will answer him I will be with him in trouble I will deliver him & honour him,²⁸ & I am resolv'd by the help of his grace to rely upon him & trust in him as long as I live, desiring to wait patiently at his feet for all the helps I stand in need of giving up myself & my seed & all that /7/ I have unto him desiring that I may see more of my insufficiency to do any thing of myself & that I may see more of the alsufficiency & willingness there is in Christ.

[III: fall 1710] After the death of my child I was very much afraid god would heat the furnace seven times hotter by reason of my sins.²⁹ But god has been better to me than my fears hitherto, for which I desire to bless his holy name & to live a life more to his honour & glory than ever I have done. But being with child & drawing near my time³⁰ being full of fears I set apart a day to seek unto the lord for his blessing on the fruit of my womb & that he would deliver me in due time with safety & that he would bless our family & dwell in it & that

²⁷Prout likely refers to the text of a sacramental lecture that she heard a few days earlier, but the quoted words do not appear in the Bible.

²⁸Ps. 91:15.

²⁹Cf. Dan. 3:19. Elizabeth (1st) Prout died on 1 December 1709. See Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout*, p. 69.

³⁰Timothy (1st) Prout was born on 12 October 1710. See Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout*, p. 69.

I may have a holy seed to serve him. But being under many fears that day wether or not I set about it aright, I was afraid I set about it in my own strength knowing if [I] did it would be in vain. But I hope I can say so far as I know my own heart that I desire that god would search me & try me & discover to me more of myself & that I can do nothing of myself but that there is fulness enough in Jesus Christ to supply all my wants & that he was willing as well as able. I was encourag'd to seek unto him by the many promises in his holy word & from that in Psalm 34:15 the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous & his ears are open to their Cry /8/ & in that "the Lord takes pleasure in them that fear him & that hope in his mercy."³¹

[IV: after 12 October 1710] I was encourag'd to hope in god by reason of his goodness to me in carrying me thro the dangers of travail & that I had experienc'd he was a prayer hearing god. I hope, I desire, to be what god would have me to be, & not to have one murmuring or discontented tho't at his providence to me but be willing to bear what he shall see meet to call to here in this world. But oh! What reason have I to Lament my coldness, & dulness, & deadness in duty. When I would fain be in the Mount with god³² then I have such straying thoughts which makes me very uneasy & know not what to do. But when I consider what full satisfaction christ has paid for the redemption of sinners, & that it is not in any thing they can

³¹Ps. 147:11.

³²This unusually evocative phrase does not appear to have a biblical referent. Prout may have been referring to a passage from Samuel Willard's recently published *Some Brief Sacramental Meditations, Preparatory for Communion at the Great Ordinance of the Supper* (Boston: Bartholomew Green, 1711), in which the Old South minister described the distractions that frequently beset even his most pious parishioners during their private devotional rituals. "When I would set my self to Meditate on any thing that is good," Willard noted, "how am I insensibly carryed aside to vain Musings? And when I would be in the Mount with God, I am gotten, ere I am aware, into a crowd of Worldly business; so that my Ponderings become Distractions, and are filled with confusion" (p. 208). At the same time, this phrase may also have been familiar to young parents, as Salem Village minister Joseph Green explained in a 1705 entry in his commonplace book following his wife's recovery from a difficult childbirth delivery: "Many a time God has appeared for us in the mount of difficulty, and we may set up our Ebenezer and say hitherto the Lord has helped us" ("The Commonplace Book of Joseph Green [1675-1715]," ed. Samuel Eliot Morison, in vol. 34 of *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* [Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1943], p. 251).

do to make satisfaction for their own sins, it is encouragement to me that it is not the worthyness of any that he bestows mercy on but for his own Names sake. Them places in John “ask & you shall receive” hitherto you have asked nothing in my Name ask & receive,³³ & that in Isaiah as for me this is my covenant with them saith the Lord my spirit that is upon them & my words Which I have put into their mouth shall not depart out of thy mouth nor out of the /g/ mouth of thy seed nor out of the mouth of thy seeds seed saith the Lord from this time forth forever more.³⁴ O how sweet have them words been to me many a time after my Childs death for myself & seed.³⁵

[V:] June 8th [1712]. I set apart a day to seek unto God for his blessing on me & my seed³⁶ & to examine the state of my soul & I hope I met with some comfort from god this day tho’ I have had many fears for a long time wether or no I was sincere with god & upright in His Covenant by reason I found so much difficulty in doing of all duty. But I found that it was not for any worthyness of my own I was to be accepted but only in & thro’ Jesus Christ; & being with child & near my time I was very much afraid of death. I went to God to beg of him that he would make me willing to be at his disposal & that Death might not be such a terror to me. I have been comforted many times with those words the Lord takes pleasure in them that fear him, that hope in his mercy.³⁷ I thought let what would come yet I would hope & trust in him. I commit all my Concerns to him for soul & body for time & eternity. Hearing Mr. Whiting³⁸ preach from them words in John for this purpose he was manifest that

³³John 16:24.

³⁴Isa. 59:21.

³⁵Prout refers here to her deceased child, Elizabeth (1st), and her “seed,” Timothy (1st).

³⁶Elizabeth (2nd) Prout was born on 15 August 1712. See Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout*, p. 69.

³⁷Ps. 147:11.

³⁸Born in Lynn, Mass., in 1682, John Whiting graduated from Harvard College in 1700. A frequent visitor to the Old South Church, he was ordained at Concord, Mass., in 1712. Whiting was dismissed from his pastorate for intemperance in 1737 and died in 1752. Clifford K. Shipton, *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates: Biographical Sketches of Those*

he might destroy the works of the Devil & in his sermon he mightily encourag'd the children of god. I was much comforted by his saying that he was confident that he that had begun a good [work] would carry it on unto perfection.³⁹

/10/ I renew'd my covenant with god this day. Oh that I may live as one devoted to his service that I may never give way to any discourageing thoughts, but that I may live more to his glory than ever yet I have done & study more how I shall bring honour to his name. O let thy promises be more sweet unto me & let them be my food to live upon at all times & I have given up my child and my unborn seed⁴⁰ to the Lord begging heartily of God to accept them for his own names sake, that he would never leave them to themselves, & he has promis'd that all our children shall be taught of him.⁴¹ O Lord this is all my Desire & all that I would ask for them.

[VI:] February 12th [1715]. Them words go unto my child bearing my dead body with thee.⁴² I have set apart this day to cry unto the Lord that he would disclose himself unto me & shew me for what he has been so terribly afflicting me in the removing one of my Children & my mother.⁴³ I found the afflictions so heavy that I could not tell what to do. I was extremely afraid of dishonouring God by my unruly passion. Being sensible that they were sent to make me better or worse I hop'd God meant it for good & to let me see more vanity in

Who Attended Harvard College, vol. 4: 1690–1700 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), pp. 532–35.

³⁹Cf. Phil. 1:6.

⁴⁰Prout refers here to her “child,” Timothy (1st) and “unborn seed,” Elizabeth (2nd).

⁴¹Cf. Isa. 54:13.

⁴²The distinctive phrase “Them words” suggests that Prout is referring to a specific scriptural passage, but this obscure phrase does not appear in the Bible or in any other religious publication of the period with which I am familiar.

⁴³Elizabeth (2nd) Prout died on 1 August 1714. Elizabeth (Scottow) Savage, Prout's mother, died later that month, on 29 August 1714. Daughter of the controversial Boston merchant and land speculator Joshua Scottow and his wife Lydia, Elizabeth was born in Boston in 1647 and married Thomas Savage Jr. in 1664. Lydia Prout was their eighth and youngest child. See Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout*, p. 69; and Julie Helen Otto, “Lydia and Her Daughters: A Boston Matrilineal Case Study,” *Nexus* 9.1 (February–March 1992): 25–26.

the world & to see more beauty in himself. For I never had such longing after communion with God & christ in heaven, that I can remember as I have had ever since. But I find sin very strong in me & Satan very ready to set in with his temptations to hinder me in duty & discourage me from trust in God. But I hope /11/ I have had strength from christ to take faster hold of him. I thought tho' he would slay me or remove all my comforts from me yet I would trust in him.⁴⁴ That place of scripture came to my mind, "he scourgeth every son whom he receiveth"⁴⁵ & that in Psalms "thou shalt call upon me in the day of trouble & I will hear thee & deliver thee & thou shalt glorify me."⁴⁶ I thought I could be contented to bear the affliction if I might but glorify God thereby. I being near my time⁴⁷ & full of doubts & fears about death & of leaving my seed I had nowhere to go but to God who is a strong refuge to them who put their trust in him.⁴⁸ These words were sweet to me, fear not I am with thee be not dismay'd I am thy God. I will help thee yea I will strengthen thee with the right hand of my righteousness, & that in Psalms blessed is he that hath the god of Jacob for his help whose hope the Lord is.⁴⁹ I thought I had no other hope but in the Lord alone.

Though I have been Join'd to the church these many years I never have written & sign'd the Covenant which I have been uneasy at but now think it proper to do. I call heaven & Earth to record this day that I do here take the lord Jehovah father Son & holy Ghost for my Portion & Cheif good & do give up myself Body & soul for thy service promising & vowing to serve thee in holiness & righteousness all the days of my life by thy grace strengthening me. L. P.

⁴⁴Cf. Job 13:15.

⁴⁵Heb. 12:6.

⁴⁶Ps. 50:15. Prout's quotation deviates from the King James version, which reads "And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me."

⁴⁷Lydia (1st) Prout was born on 13 March 1715. See Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout*, p. 69.

⁴⁸Cf. Ps. 91:2.

⁴⁹Ps. 146:5. Prout substituted the word "Blessed" for "Happy" in the King James version.

The Covenant that I here made on Earth let it be ratified in Heaven.

[VII:] /12/ I cannot but set down god's goodness to me. In the beginning of March 1714 [1715] god had visited me with a sore Sickness when I was with Child in so much that I was given over by many being weak they thought I should not have strength to hold out in my Travail.⁵⁰ But I was wonderffully carried out for after I was deliver'd I seem'd to have more strength than I had before I began to be in Travail. But I grew extreme bad afterwards. What I meet with from god I cannot express! Though many times I was full of fears and doubts yet in the latter part of my sickness I had much comfort from him. I desire never to forget the longing I had to be in heaven with him. But many times I was frighted at death, desiring with the Apostle not to be unclothed but cloathed upon.⁵¹ The sabbath which was the day of great distress to my Friends, these words were with me all that day, Psalm 91:16 "with length of Life will I satisfie thee & shew thee my salvation." I told them I believed I should not dye, & from that day I grew better &

⁵⁰The unusual retrospective tone of this entry and the complicated sequence of events it describes require an extended explanation. First, based upon the fixed dates of the entries that precede and follow (VI, VIII), the reference to March 1714 is probably inaccurate. It is possible that Prout herself may have misdated the entry, intending to have written "1714/15." New Englanders prior to 1750 continued to use the Old Style dating system of the Julian calendar, in which the year began on 25 March. The peculiarities of this practice create occasional confusion among genealogists—and perhaps here in the case of the copyist, Lydia Cutler. Second, Prout wrote entry VII *after* the next (VIII). She may have inserted the text in the available blank space of a previous page of the original journal, or Cutler may have made a transcription error and copied the entry out of its original sequence. Either way, the key to resolving the apparent confusion appears in the next entry (VIII): a sacramental meditation that Prout composed on Thursday, 10 March 1715. Sermon notes prepared by Prout's fellow parishioner Samuel Sewall reveal that members of the Old South Church observed the Lord's Supper every four weeks rather than on a fixed Sunday each month, as was the case for the neighboring First Church (see below). On 13 February 1715, Sewall noted in his diary that "My wife goes to the Lord's Supper" (*The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674–1729*, ed. M. Halsey Thomas, 2 vols. [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973], 2:786). Therefore, the next communion would have taken place at the Old South Church on 13 March 1715, three days after Prout composed her sacramental meditation (VIII) and the same "day of distress" on which she delivered her daughter, Lydia (1st), as she noted later in entry VII. For Sewall's sermon notes, see his *Notes on Sermons by Ebenezer Pemberton and Others, 1703–4*, Samuel Sewall Papers, 1672–1815, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston (available online at www.masshist.org).

⁵¹Cf. 2 Cor. 5:4.

recover'd strength insomuch that one of the Physcians to[[ld] me I was raised to their wonder. I desire to bless god for it.

[VIII:] March 10th 1715. I set apart a day to examine myself & to prepare for the Lords Supper & upon examination I cannot but say if my Heart deceive me not that tis there set down that I desire to take christ for my Prophet, Preist, & King in all his offices & am willing to be ruled by him as well as saved by him. I hope Christ is precious to me, if I know my heart. I would not part with the hopes I have (by Christ) of Heaven for ten thousand worlds & I trust tis the desire of my soul to Gloryfie him more than any thing in the world. /13/ I cannot express the burden that indwelling Sin is to me. O that from this time forward I may take faster hold of god that I may resolve never to let him go but that I may walk close with him all the days of my Life. In the beginning of this day those words were sweet unto me "and I said I will never break my Covenant with you."⁵² I hope I have been sincere in renewing my Covenant with God, & I desire to bless his holy Name for what I met with from him this day.

[IX:] October 20th 1716. This day I begg'd of God to discover to me wherefore he was so terrible angry with me in taking away all my Children at once.⁵³ I desire to be deeply humbled under his hand & to take shame to my self knowing that he has punish'd me less than my iniquities have deserved,⁵⁴ tho' it was the bitterest Cup that ever I had to drink. God was pleas'd wonderffully to uphold & strengthen me in such a time of trouble. The thoughts of where they were gone & the employment they were about was a great releif to my spirit & I thought I was the most unreasonable creature in the world to mourn. Many times it has been set home to me as if I had heard them speaking to me saying mother weep not for me.⁵⁵ The words which the Eldest of them would very often repeat in His life-time were a very great comfort to me "precious in

⁵²Judg. 2:1.

⁵³Lydia (1st) and Timothy (1st) Prout died on 15 and 19 August 1716. See Prout, *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout*, p. 69.

⁵⁴Cf. Ezra 9:13.

⁵⁵Cf. Luke 23:28.

the sight of the Lord is the Death of his Saints”⁵⁶ & I do believe they are /14/ in Heaven shining among the saints in glory which is a great Joy to me in the thoughts thereof in the midst of all my trouble & that God might do it for the trial of my Faith and patience. I desire to be thankful for the comfort I meet with from his word especially that “though no affliction for the present seemeth Joyous but greivous yet nevertheless afterward it yeildeth the peaceable fruits of Righteousness”⁵⁷ & that every Son whom he received he scourged & if we were without afflictions god would not deal with us as he did with his children. I went to Sacrament at the Brick Meeting House.⁵⁸ I never met with more from god in my Life. O the desire I had to be with christ in heaven I cannot express! I did not know how to go back to the world again. But as soon as it was over I grew cold again. I thought it was a great mercy that I was with Child,⁵⁹ & that God was angry with me for being so uneasy when I was in that situation. I hope I shall be more humbled for that Sin and for all others. I desire to be more earnest to god for the fruit of my womb than ever I have been & to trust in him for his blessing thereon, knowing that if it was good for

⁵⁶Ps. 116:15.

⁵⁷Heb. 12:11. Prout substituted the phrase “though no affliction” for “Now no chastening,” which appears in the King James version.

⁵⁸Boston’s First Church administered the sacrament on “the first Lords day of every month,” which, in this case, would have been 4 November 1716 (*The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630–1868*, vols. 39–41 of *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, ed. Richard D. Pierce [Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1961], p. 135). At the time of its construction in 1712, the “Old Brick” meetinghouse was the largest in New England. See Peter Benes’s *Meetinghouses of Early New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), pp. 100–101.

⁵⁹Elizabeth (3rd) Prout was born on 13 November 1716. Genealogists have long believed that she died young, and yet Timothy Prout’s 1767 will includes several bequests to “my daughter Elizabeth” (Coll. S-2076, Maine Historical Society, Portland). A recent study of the Prout family theorizes that Timothy and Lydia had a fourth child named Elizabeth sometime around 1728. No vital records from Boston or baptismal records from the Old South Church corroborate such a claim. Instead, Elizabeth (3rd) was undoubtedly the same “Spinster” who sold the real estate she had inherited from her “honoured Father” for one thousand pounds in 1771 (Deed of Sale from Elizabeth Prout to William Fogg, Scarborough, Me., 7 November 1771, Collection of the Author). For previous genealogical studies, see Lawrence Park’s “Old Boston Families Number Three: The Savage Family,” *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 67 (July 1913): 206; Otto’s “Lydia and Her Daughters,” p. 27; and Prout’s *Ancestry and Descendants of Captain Timothy Prout*, p. 69.

me he would yet give me a Seed on earth to serve him. Them words have been sweet to me he will give grace & glory & no good thing will he withhold from them that love him.⁶⁰ In the midst of my Trouble I was distress'd by /15/ Satan. I never had kept a day of thanksgiving in private till then & I was as it were in the mount with god but had the dreadfullest thought darted into my mind that I would not express for the world. I thought I should have gone distracted for some time. It was more terrible to me than all the afflictions that ever I met with in all my life. I desire to be thankful to heaven that I was heard, for I cry'd bitterly to the lord & he answer'd me speedily & strengthen'd me with strength in my Soul. I desire to be more in this duty of praising God all the days of my Life. Sometime after god visited my Child with a terrible Fit of Sickness. I was in great distress. I thought I could resign it better than ever I had done any before to Heaven. Though I had taken my leave of it as gone God was pleased to prayers for it & Recover it & spare it to me as yet. Oh that I could devote it anew to Him. I desire to live a new Life to the praise of God who has done so much for me. I cannot express the wonderful goodness of God to me many a time both as to Soul & Body.⁶¹

⁶⁰Cf. Ps. 84:11.

⁶¹Copyist Lydia Cutler filled the remaining space on this leaf with looping lines to mark the end of the text. She employed a similar practice in her own religious writings (see Cutler, *Religious Memoranda*). The last leaf of the journal is unnumbered and contains a brief index of ministers and meetinghouses mentioned in the manuscript. Written in pencil in the upper-right corner by a later hand, the list reads as follows: "Willard p. 4 / Whiting p. 9 / Brick Meeting House p. 14."