



Editorial

I present to you a blockbuster issue of *The New England Quarterly*. Herein four senior scholars wrestle with some of the fundamental questions of their respective fields. Tackling the complex matter of religion in nineteenth-century America, Robert Milder enacts the drama of Ralph Waldo Emerson's career-long spiritual quest. Seeking to ground his initial conversion experience of 1827, in which he intuited "the immanence of moral law everywhere in the universe," Emerson turned to science. By 1834, having dispensed with a personal God, he quipped, "If the triangles had a god, they would paint him with three sides." While not entirely like us (anthropomorphism), the universe, Emerson nonetheless decided, exists for us (anthropocentricism); its natural law can be reconciled with moral law. In the end, however, science did not yield for him the proof he desired, and he was thrown back on the intuitions of religious experience. As his development in the mid-1840s led beyond the synthesis he had achieved in the Divinity School Address and elsewhere, he increasingly, in the absence of an acceptable alternative, retreated to "an idealism he had outgrown as a bulwark against a naturalism he feared."

Rewinding two centuries to seventeenth-century puritan New England, Francis J. Bremer revisits the received view that a spiritual relation, a persuasive account of a conversion experience, was a requirement for church membership throughout New England, an investigation he presaged in an Exchange with Michael Winship in the March 2014 issue of *NEQ*. To be sure, clergymen and congregations sought to admit only the godly to their covenanted communities, but the profession of faith that was to demonstrate the prospective member's suitability could be in at least some notable cases a well-wrought catalog of doctrinal beliefs. But while not universally, or perhaps even generally, expected of applicants for church membership, conversion narratives were ubiquitous, widely shared by men and women of all stations, a form of prophesying intended to strengthen the religious community and attract new proselytes. That vital function should no longer be subordinated to some churches' formal prerequisites.

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Bremer identifies the failure to recognize the diverse practices that comprised the New England Way as a lamentable scholarly penchant to take Massachusetts as representative of the entire region. L. H. Roper pursues that line into the political realm as he carefully details the fall of New Amsterdam to an English force in 1664 as well as the activities of an allied royal commission established to investigate intercolonial disputes. While historians have typically characterized the episode as a noteworthy instance of seventeenth-century New Englanders “successfully resisting the encroachments of a centralizing state,” in fact it was New Englanders (New Englanders from outside or opposed to the reigning authorities of Massachusetts) who, owing to their special interests and aided by their metropolitan associations, lobbied for intervention from a reluctant Crown. The essay concludes with a reflection on varying definitions of “liberty” in the period, a cautionary note intended to prompt scholars to recalibrate “the monarchy’s post-Restoration relationship to its ‘possessions.’”

Jumping back to the period in which Emerson was first speaking in public about his hard-won insights into man’s relation to the cosmos, we meet Anne Laura Clarke, who was also traveling throughout New England and beyond (likewise for fame and fortune) on a well-executed lecture circuit. Clarke, who remains obscure in the annals of women’s history and oratory, was a pioneer in her field. In tracing her distinguished, albeit rather brief, career, Granville Ganter considers the causes for her neglect. Clarke, who lectured before mixed audiences of men and women in the 1820s and ’30s, did so not as an orator but as a teacher. That “deft negotiation of the prejudices of her age challenges current beliefs about the social prohibitions female orators encountered before the 1840s as well as what activities were available to women in previous decades.” Because her successful conformity to the norms of her era masked the audacity of her achievement and because she chose an intellectual medium that is largely ephemeral, Clarke has, until now, been invisible to historians in search of iconoclastic heralds of Seneca Falls. Thanks to Professor Ganter, she is no longer in the shadows.



We are proud to announce that David Brion Davis, a member of our Editorial Board, received the National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama at a White House ceremony on 28 July. Cited for having “shed light on the contradiction of a free Nation built by forced labor . . . his examinations of slavery and abolitionism” will, it is hoped, “drive us to keep making moral progress in our time.”

—LINDA SMITH RHOADS