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The “puritan family” has elicited the attention of historians since at least 1944, when Edmund S. Morgan published The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England. Of course, much has changed since then even as Morgan’s book remains a powerful interpretation. As social history came to the fore in the late 1960s and 1970s, the family in colonial New England took on a newfound centrality, evidenced in works by historians such as Philip J. Greven Jr. and John Demos. But increasingly, during the 1970s and 1980s, scholars challenged the centrality of puritanism and New England to the national imaginary. Perry Miller’s oft-referenced claim that his study of the New England mind “amounts to a sort of working model for American history” could no longer withstand scrutiny. Feminist historians such as Nancy F. Cott, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Linda K. Kerber turned their critical attention to separate spheres and the white New England family of the later eighteenth century, while historians increasingly argued that the experience and culture of middle-class white men and women may have been hegemonic but they obscured the experience of enslaved and free African Americans, Native Americans, and the lower sorts. Moreover, the history of sexuality has come to occupy some of the work in what we might call histories of intimacy. 2

However, two new books return us to the history of the family and sex in colonial and early national Massachusetts. Both M. Michelle Jarrett Morris, in Under Household Government, and Kelly A. Ryan, in Regulating


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Passion, focus their attentions on the complicated and conflictual intersections of sex(uality) and family. Read together, they present an almost continuous historical narrative, from Morris’s focus on late seventeenth-century puritan families and sexual transgressions to Ryan’s attention to the transformation and perpetuation of patriarchy across the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While they both employ the tools of social history and rely heavily on legal sources, their approaches are markedly different. Morris, seemingly more indebted to the (no longer) new social history of the 1970s and even older works, generally limits her claims to the social life of puritans, and thus her book reads very much as a community study of puritans in Middlesex and Suffolk Counties. Indeed, Morris claims that her book “finds perhaps its greatest kinship with . . . The Puritan Family” (3) but that her “focus has been on how families behaved in times of crisis” (4). Ryan, for her part, seems more influenced by recent attempts to reinvigorate the history of colonial New England through attentions to the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Nonetheless, she too speaks to an older generation of scholarship, conjuring Miller’s ghost through recourse to the broad (and ultimately unconvincing) claim that she “examines patriarchal rule and sexuality in Massachusetts, which is a particularly advantageous site to study power dynamics as many of its features are similar to other colonies in North America” (3). By claiming that Massachusetts is nearly representative of colonial America writ large, Ryan sometimes underplays the differences and discontinuities between various colonial spaces. That said, these are two important works that return our attention to the workings of patriarchy in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Massachusetts and the regulation of sexuality through what Ryan calls “the marital monopoly on sex” (4).

Morris has written a history of the intersection of sex and family in a society where everyone was legally required to live “under household government” (8)—that is, to be a member of some family. Morris’s keenest insight is that legal skirmishes over sexual transgressions—including rape, fornication, adultery, and infanticide—were also not simply conflicts between individuals and the state (as the law would have it) but, in fact, were conflicts between larger family networks. As Morris demonstrates, it was “family members, not the community at large, [that] provided the backbone of the sexual policing system” (6). In one sense this should not come as a surprise given the extensive work done over the past five decades excavating the ways that kin networks structured social life. Yet, the familial investment in policing sexuality has eluded the grasp of most historians, and Morris does a great service in bringing to light the familial investment in policing sexuality. Moreover, despite the cliché of “little commonwealths” (1), Morris demonstrates persuasively and exhaustively that families and the state were frequently in conflict with one another. “When family members faced prosecution for sexual crimes,” Morris writes,
“the good of the little commonwealth far outweighed the more abstract common good. The ties that bound together families—even extended one [sic]—were far stronger than those that bound families to the colony of Massachusetts Bay” (141). Given the importance of household government in seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay, Morris asks, “if court trials played out as contests between families, what happened to those persons who stood outside the bounds of familial protection?” (7). Here, the patriarchal family was so determinative that the position of those only ambiguously in families, such as servants and the enslaved, nearly always put them at odds with the colony’s governance.

Under Household Government is divided into seven chapters that cover a variety of sexual transgressions and family entanglements. Morris is most effective in using microhistories, as when she explores the various sexual transgressions that disrupted what should have been the orderly, patriarchal household of one of the colony’s leaders, Daniel Gookin Sr., or when she develops some genuinely insightful analyses of the complex contradictions of familial culture as it emerged in rape and infanticide trials. Other chapters follow a broader path through the primarily legal archive, addressing the way puritan doctrine intersected with colonial laws regarding sexuality, charting the manner in which marriage transformed the meaning of sex (and vice versa), or covering various tensions over child rearing and the parent-child relationship more generally. While Jarrett occasionally deals with race throughout the book, it is in the final two chapters that she most effectively and directly analyzes the ways in which race structured family and sex. In one chapter, the reader is offered a close analysis of two trials for infanticide that reveals the multiple ways in which families and households were stratified by race when it came to kinship and sexuality. In another, she persuasively documents the different treatment of white servants and enslaved persons when each was accused of various sex crimes.

Morris offers a plethora of fascinating instances of the intersection of sex, family, religion, and law throughout the book. The reader finds a particularly persuasive account of the ways competing family claims came into conflict in the surprisingly complicated legal life of Gookin’s family. In a compelling discussion, Morris traces the different ways in which various people in trials for sexual crimes “re-envision themselves or their adversaries as typologies of biblical figures” (53). This practical critique of everyday life and the legal system relied on an expected intimate knowledge of the Bible but allowed for a particularly flexible range of identifications. One wishes that Morris had offered a more nuanced gendered analysis here, as some women identified with male biblical figures, but the analysis remains a compelling and exciting part of the book. Morris’s treatment of two infanticide trials, one of a Spanish Indian slave named Marea and the other of a free black servant named Zipporah, is an especially rich chapter
that exposes the way in which white families’ treatment of sexual crimes, or rumors of sexual crimes, became wrapped up in issues of ownership, labor, and race.

Like most historians of sexuality in the early colonial period, Morris relies primarily on legal sources and the occasional sermon, as well as well-worn texts such as Aristoteles Master-piece. This makes some of her narrative seem quite familiar, even as she offers some fresh readings of these sources. The familiarity of her argument may also stem from her particular engagement with historiography and relevant literature from the broader field of sexuality and kinship studies. Put simply, despite being published in 2013, Morris’s book engages with very few works published after 2000, which is most apparent in the historiographical introduction but shapes the study as a whole.

Regulating Passion picks up, both chronologically and thematically, where Morris’s book ends. Ryan has written an “intersectional” (2) history of what she calls “racialized patriarchy” (58), defined as the conjunction of “white men’s sexual privilege, white men’s natural leadership, and devaluation of Indians’ and African Americans’ sexual and gender mores” (104). In this, her book is a nice complement to works such as John Wood Sweet’s Bodies Politic, which open up the complicated articulations of race and social life in New England. Mining legal records and the print public sphere, Ryan shows effectively how white male authority was maintained through the elision of the sexual and familial relations of white women, young white men, poor white men, African American men and women (free and enslaved), and Indian men and women. And, in a persuasive reversal, Ryan tracks the way in which patriarchal language was deployed by African Americans and Indians in order to make claims on emergent rights in the postrevolutionary era.

The book is divided into two sections, with the first exploring the articulation of racialized patriarchy in the colonial era and the second tracking challenges to and the persistence of patriarchy in postrevolutionary Massachusetts. This temporal development in patriarchy was matched by a shift from legal and institutional regulation of sexuality in the maintenance of white male authority in the colonial period to a postrevolutionary shift to the social/cultural, especially in the regulatory apparatus of the print public sphere of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is a particularly effective strategy, as it demonstrates that even as legal rights

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3 Aristoteles Master-piece. . . (London, 1684). A seventeenth-century sex and midwifery manual, this text also circulated throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world through the mid-nineteenth century as a kind of pornography. It has become a nearly canonical text in the history of sexuality.

were gained, to a limited degree, by African American and Indian men, the
-cultural apparatus worked to regulate and limit those moments of emanci-
pation and did so most effectively around questions of sexuality.

Intersectionality is sometimes simply invoked rather than practiced, but Ryan puts the term to good use, and it animates every chapter of the book (setting her apart from Morris, who reserves such an approach for the closing of her book). Given the centrality of patriarchy to the argument of Ryan’s book, it is particularly refreshing to see the ways in which her intersectional approach helps open up the category itself, rather than simply deploying it as a monolithic analytic catchall. So when she begins the book with a discussion of white women’s sexuality in relation to marriage, Ryan is able to show how “women’s erotic power” (14) was constructed as a means to maintain white male authority but also continued to threaten it too. Ryan demonstrates the way in which patriarchal rule rested on a hazy equation between young white men, poor white men, and white women, all of whom were structurally subordinated, a subordination maintained through constructions of their sexuality. Regulating Passion is also quite successful in moving among and between a variety of types of sources, as when it turns to the way in which “many whites drew on cultural strategies to sustain racial hierarchy rather than institutional and legal controls” (105) in the wake of independence. Some readers might wish to see a broader engagement with other disciplines, as for example when Ryan invokes the term “patriarchal gaze” (6) without even a nod toward the long history of psychoanalytic work on the gaze. Some of the book, especially in the later chapters on the early nineteenth century, covers topics such as virtue, seduction, and citizenship that have been widely discussed by scholars. But in putting all these topics together and stretching across the entire eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Ryan has given us a profound reimagining of patriarchy in early America.

While these books are quite effective at tracking the fraught relations between sexuality and family, it is less clear what they tell us, conceptu-
ally and methodologically, about sexuality as a category. Six years ago the literary critic Bruce Burgett questioned the tendency among historians of sexuality to deploy a rather narrow definition of sex and thus almost inadvertently police the archival boundaries of sexuality. “The general category of sexuality,” Burgett wrote, “works against efforts to specify the acts, prac-
tices, identities, and behaviors that are and are not under consideration in any given instance.” But Burgett was, in a sense, asking for a more imaginative conceptualization of sexuality, one that limned the tensions between present and past in the writing of histories of sexuality. Though both of these books do what they do quite effectively, the archive and the meaning of

sexuality remain rather familiar and static. From the critical work of Michel Foucault, which located the deployment of sexuality and thus the emergence of the category in precisely the period covered by these books, to the work of both queer theorists and those working in kinship studies, sex, family, and kinship have been reworked in any variety of directions.6 Yet this has had little effect on early Americanists and early American historians in particular. As strong as these books are at times, it is worth pondering what else they could have become had they been more conversant in the theoretical literature on sexuality and kinship. It is high time that early American historians stop policing disciplinary boundaries and engage a bit more with the wider critical literature.