



Anne Hutchinson and Courage: In the Face of Adversity

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

Anne Marbury was born in Lincolnshire, England in 1591. Her father was an Anglican minister who developed Puritan beliefs, making him an outcast in British society. He was imprisoned for heresy before her birth. Mr. Marbury taught his children in his school in Lincolnshire until the family moved to London in 1605.

The next year, Anne married William Hutchinson, and the two began following John Cotton, a leading Puritan minister. Puritans held meetings called conventicles where men and women discussed scripture and Anne began to participate as a leader of such groups. When Cotton returned to Massachusetts, Anne and her family decided to follow him in 1634 in order to continue with their religious practices under his tutelage.

Upon arriving in Boston, Hutchinson continued with the conventicles and home bible studies. However, she began to develop a theology that stood in stark contrast to the authorities in Boston and freely expressed her radical views. Hutchinson began to disrupt or leave sermons delivered by their opponents. Eventually, she was charged with heresy, excommunicated from the church, and banished from the colony.

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In the year 1637, 200 citizens of Boston eagerly flocked to witness the trial of Anne Hutchinson. She was accused of sedition and acting in a treasonous manner against the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Over the previous three years, Hutchinson had developed a reputation for being outspoken and opinionated. Some considered her a troublemaker. Others thought she was a courageous voice for religious liberty. During the voyage from England to the New World, for example, she had refused to be silent about her religious views, challenging the leadership of the minister on board the ship.

Now, her ideas were threatening the political and religious institutions of the Boston community. If she were found guilty, Hutchinson could be fined, flogged, or banished. Recently, the colony had hanged four Quakers—including a woman—for their controversial ideas. The fiery Hutchinson needed to decide if she would stand up for her beliefs or compromise them to protect herself and her family.

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Hutchinson had developed a large group of followers through her work as a midwife in the colony. Additionally, she was well-read and enjoyed discussing Scripture with fellow citizens. Through her work, she made many friends and began to invite women to her house for Bible study and discussions of John Cotton's sermons. In time, word of the meetings spread and by 1637, the group had over sixty men and women. Hutchinson addressed her growing audience from a large chair, offering her views on religion and salvation. As her popularity grew, many leaders of the colony, including former governor John Winthrop, reacted strongly to her dissenting views. However, Hutchinson courageously continued to express her opinion.

Hutchinson's theology posed a threat to the very foundation of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Unlike many of the Puritans, Hutchinson believed that faith, more than good works, was necessary for salvation. She subscribed to a "covenant of faith," not a "covenant of works." She also believed that God revealed his teachings directly to her, which Puritan leaders considered heretical.

Additionally, Puritans did not make a distinction between their religious and political leaders. When Hutchinson challenged the religious teachings of the ministers, she was automatically challenging the political system. Following John Winthrop's re-election as Governor of the Colony in 1637, Hutchinson was arrested and put on trial.

At the opening of the proceedings, Winthrop lectured Hutchinson about the dangers of her teachings, stating, "Your opinions being known to be different from the word of God may seduce many simple souls that resort unto you." The justices, all of them ministers, questioned her right to speak, to express her religious views, and even to live in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

With tremendous personal courage, she faced the court of forty-nine men alone. Strong-willed and quick-witted, Hutchinson (who was five months pregnant) defended herself intelligently and denied the charges, declaring, "I am called here to answer before you, but I hear no things laid to my charge." When Winthrop asked her why she held her weekly meetings, she vehemently replied, "It is lawful for me to do so." When he asked her if it were appropriate for her to be teaching men at her meetings, she wryly responded, "Why do you call me to teach the court?"

Making its case against her, the court called six ministers to testify about Hutchinson's preaching. They noted that she was "not only difficult in her opinions, but also of an intemperate spirit." Hutchinson withstood the inquiry, answering questions boldly and honestly. Two days into the trial, she openly proclaimed to have learned God's will through an immediate revelation. Deputy Governor Thomas Dudley scoffed, "How! An immediate revelation." She replied without hesitation, "By the voice of His own spirit to my soul."

With those words, Hutchinson's fate in the colony was sealed. The ministers would not accept this challenge to their spiritual authority, especially from a woman. Her one-time mentor, Reverend John Cotton, proclaimed that her meetings were a "promiscuous and filthy coming together of men and women without Distinction or Benefit of Marriage." Winthrop

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described the meetings as “a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God, nor fitting to your sex.” Expecting the worst, Hutchinson vowed, “Now if you do condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be truth, I must commit myself unto the Lord.”

After several days of testimony, Winthrop issued the court’s decision. “The court hath already declared themselves satisfied concerning the things you hear, and concerning the troublesomeness of her spirit and the danger of her course amongst us, which is not to be suffered.” Hutchinson was convicted of sedition and banished from Boston, being deemed “a woman not fit for our society.”

The following year, Hutchinson, her husband, their fourteen children, and sixty of her followers moved to the island of Aquidnick (Rhode Island), a haven for religious dissenters. In 1642, following the death of her husband, Hutchinson and her youngest children moved to the Dutch colony of New Netherlands. The Native Americans on Long Island revolted the following year and destroyed many of the settlements. Hutchinson and all but one of her children were killed. Upon hearing news of this, some Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony claimed it was evidence of divine will.

In the end, Anne Hutchinson may not have experienced the religious freedom she sought when she and her husband crossed the Atlantic in 1634. Her personal courage, however, helped lay the foundation for the religious liberty that Americans now treasure. She challenged the established religion and government of her day, willing to risk losing her home and her life to stay true to her conscience.