Chapter 1

Introduction

Providentialism was not born in Puritan America, but when seventeenth-century New England professed its belief in God’s agency in the great and small, public and private events of their lives, this profession of faith took on uniquely American coloring. Moreover, it became a deep-seated and dominant notion in American culture. Belief in divine providence expressed itself in the national historical and aesthetic literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Well into the nineteenth century, historians and literary authors continued to draw on the tropes of God's providential designs for his people. The language of this profound religious tenet also found its way into many of the nation's major political manifestos, such as those surrounding the Revolutionary War, Manifest Destiny, and the Abolition movement, and has continued in twentieth-century discourse concerning issues as diverse as John Kennedy's pronouncements on the U.S. government's involvement in foreign affairs and the religious right's claims regarding the AIDS epidemic. Religious imagery, scriptural allusion, and even religious doctrinal assertion form powerful components of American political and historical writing, the philosophical underpinning of which is a belief in divine providence. More specifically, national political and historical documents regularly suggest God's hand in the lives of individual Americans and the policies and practices of the nation.

Belief in divine providence is the basis of a narrative form that is the staple of Puritan letters. The providence tale in early America is a formulæic narrative that testifies to the omniscience and omnipotence of God, and especially to the belief that God exhibits these qualities in his active presence in the daily lives of his people in New England.¹ That the power

¹. My understanding of providentialism in Calvinist New England is based largely on the work of the following critics. David D. Hall offers a thorough and insightful history of the
and will of God is exhibited in this world was a commonplace for colonial Puritans. The order and beauty of nature itself bespoke God’s majesty. The Puritans also understood that unpredictable displays of nature and exceptional occurrences in the life of men and women were also signs of divine providence and represented God’s special message to his people. Moreover, they sought to explicate and understand God’s voice in the exceptional and remarkable events they saw around them, and they did so through the providence tale.

Each providence tale recounts an extraordinary occurrence, such as an eerie, prophetic dream, a remarkable religious conversion, a dramatic gallows confession, a miraculous deliverance from shipwreck, the exposé of sinful wrongdoing, or a deathwatch vision. Despite its brevity, the tale offers a measure of character development and dialogue, most frequently ejaculatory prayers. The plot of the providence tale relies on great suspense—what will become of the sailors lost at sea, will the young wife survive Indian captivity, will the bereaved parents recover from the death of their baby? Finally, within the author’s narrative construction, the dénouement of the tale clearly illustrates not only the divine hand in the lives of his people, but divine judgment—God sends a bird to feed the one virtuous sailor aboard the shipwrecked vessel, punishes the blasphemer with the inability to speak, and causes the murder victim to cry out from the grave to reveal the name of his killer. Closure inevitably sets the anecdote within the framework of Puritan theology, and thereby articulates its significance and ensures its importance. The message is unchanging—God maintains an active presence in the world and in the lives of his people. He blesses and

preserves his elect while he brings public, definitive, and symbolic punishment to those who sin.

The providence tale is now recognized as an early expression of the short story and a fiction form that fascinated readers well into the nineteenth century. Such tales are regularly found as embedded narratives in Puritan sermons. They are also found in collected form, most notably in Increase Mather’s *Illustrious Providences* (1684), and then in book six of Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702). Both works offer a full compendium of tales recounting extraordinary occurrences, such as exceptional medical cures, incidents of witchcraft, gallows confessions, and tales of depraved behavior, among other sensational topics. More than any other collection of New England’s “remarkable occurrences,” Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* captured the imagination of its audience. Peter Gay recounts that the book was “valuable enough to be stolen: in 1720, a burglar ransacking Jonathan Belcher’s well-stocked warehouse included in his booty ‘a Book Entitled, Magnalia Christi Americana.’” Book six of *Magnalia* documents the “wonder-workings” of God among the common people of New England, and, like the earlier volumes of Mather’s history, they underscore Mather’s rationale for his extensive history of New England—to revive his readers’ and his congregants’ devotion to the Puritan commonwealth. Gay describes the book as “tribal history, expressing Puritan sentiments, feeding Puritan anxieties, and sustaining Puritan pride” (77). This was its social function in the early eighteenth century and served the same role well into the nineteenth century, where it continued to hold the attention of American readers.


The early volumes of *Magnalia* recount the great deeds of great public figures in seventeenth-century Puritan America. Included in these books are the biographies of early civic leaders, the ecclesiastical history of the New English colonies, an account of the early years of Harvard College, and the history of war with the native Americans, among other subjects of political, economic, and religious history. Mather's goal for these accounts is to educate and also to inspire. Thus, the early biographical miniatures of the Puritan forefathers resemble hagiography, designed to create culture heroes of the most prominent of the early settlers for subsequent generations of New English colonists, and Mather hoped that such accounts would remind them of the lofty vision and the sacrifices of the men who founded Plymouth and Massachusetts.

Book six of Mather's *Magnalia* is distinct from the preceding books in that it offers a compendium of providence tales about the common folk of New England. The book is divided into seven chapters, the first relating tales of remarkable rescues at sea and the second recounting extraordinary rescues from death. In chapter three, Mather investigates the phenomenon of thunder, which he understands to be the voice of God speaking to man. The fourth chapter describes dramatic religious conversions, while the following chapter, the longest in book six, documents the hand of God in disclosing the evil deeds of sinners and punishing those sinners. Chapter six recounts conversions and crimes among the native Americans, and the final chapter documents the work of demons and witches among the people of New England. Finally, an appendix to book six offers several anecdotes about exceptional conversions among young children, tales which Mather hopes will “encourage . . . ] piety in other children.”

Despite its broad range of subject matter, book six of *Magnalia Christi Americana* is not a random collection of strange stories. Accounts of wonderworking in early seventeenth-century America mix with contemporary tales to signal the continuity of experience of God's people in America. Further, in appending the epic tale of the Puritan forefathers found in the early books with personal, contemporary accounts in book six, Mather elides the political, religious, and social history of early New England with that of his current readers to further convince eighteenth-century colonists of their affinity to the spiritual origins of the New England colonies. His message is clear: God has a special abiding relationship with the people of New England and continues to work wonders among them.

Later, this message was not lost on the nineteenth-century reader. In her semi-autobiographical novel, *Poganuc People*, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote:

It was a happy hour when [father] brought home and set up in his book-case Cotton Mather’s “Magnalia,” in a new edition of two volumes. What wonderful stories these! and stories, too, about her own country, stories that made her feel that the very ground she trod on was consecrated by some special dealing of God’s providence.\(^5\)

Stowe was both convinced of the theory that divine providence guided her national history and attracted by the notion that being a descendant of the Puritan saints afforded her special grace.

“Remarkables of the Divine Providence Among the People of New-England,” book six of Mather’s *Magnalia*, provided many later authors and readers with examples of the early American literary type of the providence tale, which is now recognized as the beginning of the American short narrative. In a general introduction to his *Magnalia*, Cotton Mather asserts that he is mindful of his sacred charge as author of the history of the Puritan people in New England, and clearly states that his text is written with “all historical fidelity and simplicity” (1:25). Yet, Jane Donahue Eberwein observes that although the work was intended as history, “the imaginative ordering and interpretation of events . . . seem mythopoetic rather than scholarly” (195). The author’s command of both rhetoric and narrative strategy is evident throughout *Magnalia*. As Larzer Ziff has noted, “on the eve of the novel’s birth, his was the stuff of novelists.”\(^6\)

Indeed, more than a century after the initial publication of Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*, American authors continue to respond to the message and the narrative form of his providence tales. This book investigates the ways in which Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Edith Wharton rely on Mather’s providence tales at critical moments in their work. These diverse authors, who are rarely grouped in literary studies, have radically divergent responses to Mather’s theology, historiography,

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and literary forms. However, each takes up Mather’s themes and forms and, in distinct ways, comments on the providence tales in *Magnalia Christi Americana* and interrogates these tales as foundational statements about American history, American identity, and God’s providential designs for America and Americans. More interestingly, each author—regardless of his or her individual theological and religious position—subverts Mather’s providence tales for his or her own narrative objectives.

One of the most provocative aspects of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century appropriation of Mather’s providence tales is the later authors’ concern with authorial ethos. While these authors interrogate the concept of God’s providential design for America, their underlying anxiety centers on the role of the historian or narrator itself. Their questions are many: Who is entitled to speak on behalf of the American people? Who is in a position to conceptualize the events of the past? When we examine a historiographic framework based on God’s providential design, who is charged with speaking for God? Mather’s text is clear on this point. The minister is uniquely positioned to serve as historian. In divergent ways, the authors discussed in this book challenge this stance. Each draws the reader into a reconsideration of social authority and narrative authority. Each destabilizes the position of the teller of tales and cautions the reader to be ever alert to the authority and influence of the teller as well as the tale.

The writings of Cotton Mather had come under attack before these authors investigated and appropriated his *Magnalia Christi Americana*. In the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin, who had met Mather on occasion, was decidedly antipathetic to the rigid Calvinist orthodoxy that Cotton Mather had come to represent, and rejected the ways in which Puritanism had insinuated itself into scientific knowledge and judicial practice. Franklin parodied Cotton Mather’s tales of witchcraft in a newspaper article, “A Witch Trial at Mount Holly,” which appeared in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1730. The article was a hoax that reported on a witch trial in which neither the accused nor the accusers pass the purportedly scientific tests that were devised to prove the accused innocent of the charge of witchcraft. Likewise, critics have noted that Franklin’s satiric “Silence Dogood” essays respond to Mather’s prescriptive statements on how to live a Christian life. The very name, Silence Dogood, echoes two

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of Mather’s publications, *Silentiarius: A brief essay on the holy silence and godly patience* and *Bonifacius: An essay upon the good*. Later, in his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin refers directly to Cotton Mather, again for ironic purpose. Franklin appears to boast of his heritage when he identifies his maternal grandfather, Peter Folger, as “one of the first Settlers of New England, of whom honourable mention is made by Cotton Mather, in his Church History of that Country, (entitled Magnalia Christi Americana) as a godly learned Englishman.” Yet, he notes that Folger’s contribution to the colonies was his writing “in favor of Liberty of Conscience, and in behalf of the Baptists, Quakers, and other Sectaries, that had been under Persecution,” positions that Franklin was well aware as being contrary to those of Mather (5–6). In exposing Cotton Mather’s praise of an individual who advocates principles antithetical to Mather’s, Franklin is able to undercut both Mather’s religious and political positions as well as his credibility as an author.

Donald Ringe rightly notes that Franklin’s enlightenment principles enable him to “dismiss ghosts, goblins, and witches as the relics of a more credulous age and [he was] proud of the fact that American society had been formed when such phenomena were no longer credited and tales of superstition had been relegated to the nursery.” However, Franklin must have been sufficiently anxious about the legacy of Cotton Mather’s remarkable providences to compel him to disparage Mather in newsprint and in books throughout his career. According to Mather’s biographer, Kenneth Silverman, “by 1710 [Cotton Mather] may well have become the best-known man in America.” It was clear that he was the most prolific

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9. Viewing Franklin’s *Autobiography* from a different perspective, Sacvan Bercovitch also links the text to Mather’s biographical miniatures in *Magnalia* and finds that these texts provide the “form and outlook” for Franklin’s work as well as for later rags to riches narratives. See Bercovitch’s “‘Delightful Examples of Surprising Prosperity’: Cotton Mather and the American Success Story,” *English Studies* 51.1 (1970): 40–43.


published author in America with almost 400 separate titles to his name. Silverman reports: “it is imaginable that numerous people overseas, many people in the colonies, most people in New England, and nearly everyone in Boston owned some of his works” (198). Stephen Carl Arch notes that “Benjamin Franklin's connection to Cotton Mather is not just through one of Mather’s books; it is through Mather’s example as America’s first public man of letters” (183). For Franklin and other contemporary writers, his was the voice to reckon with.

Later, Washington Irving joins Franklin in undercutting Mather’s reputation. Irving does so through the character of Ichabod Crane, who is introduced as “a perfect master of Cotton Mather's history of New England Witchcraft, in which, by the way, he most firmly and potently believed.”

The dénouement of Irving's tale reveals that the schoolmaster who persists in believing the superstitious tales of America’s Puritan past is out of place in the new America. Both infantilized and feminized, his authority is limited to the schoolroom, and his appeal is limited to old women. The young men of his generation ridicule him, and the young girl he courts ends up in the arms of another man. More brutally, the Yankee is revealed as a shallow fortune-seeker, and, in this way, his Puritan values are linked to his avarice.

In addition, when Ichabod Crane, the teller of Mather’s tales, counters Brom Bones, the teller of tales that issue from the Hudson Valley, the contest is almost one-sided. Brom Bones's story of the headless horseman not only entertains, but it has potency and immediate agency. It alters lives and fortunes. Ichabod Crane tries to banish Bones's tale from his mind by singing psalms, but in Irving’s story, even the word of God cannot drown out the native legend. Crane’s reprisal of Mather’s antiquated tale is bested by Bones’s folk tale, and Mather's authority is supplanted by that of a native Dutch farmer whose lack of erudition and refinement is more than compensated by ample honor and good humor. Speaking to Irving’s central


Speaking of another of Irving’s characters, John Greenleaf Whittier wrote in his 1847 publication, The Supernaturalism of New England, “Modern skepticism and philosophy have not yet eradicated the belief of supernatural visitation from the New England mind. Here and there—oftenest in our still, fixed, valley-sheltered, unvisited nooks and villages—the Rip Van Winkles of a progressive and restless population—may be still found devout believers worthy of the days of the two Mathers.” See Whittier (1847), Supernaturalism, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 40.
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concern about the philosophical battle waged under the guise of Bones and Crane, Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky concludes that “the farmer rightfully ousts the pedant from a world whose values he does not share.” The rational, utilitarian posture of Bones triumphs over superstitious, Puritan religious thought, with Bones using the devices of his rival—a supernatural tale—to defeat him.

In the case of Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” the eerie tales of Cotton Mather are countered and conquered by a gothic account of a purportedly historical event. As the legacy of Cotton Mather continues in the nineteenth century, with later authors invoking the person and his works, these authors revisit Mather’s providence tales and revise them as gothic stories. In distinct ways, Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Edith Wharton rely on the gothic mode to resist Cotton Mather’s historical narrative of the people of New England.

Scholarship surrounding the gothic mode in the American literary tradition is vast and varied. While early studies marginalized the gothic as regional and largely southern literature, or trivialized gothic texts as popular and overwrought, Teresa Goddu argues for the centrality of the gothic mode in American letters. Goddu observes that gothic texts cannot be fully understood apart from their social and historical context precisely because gothic literature serves to “expose the cultural contradictions of national myth.”

Texts written in the gothic mode challenge

17. I concur with Louis S. Gross who writes, “The American Gothic narrative is primarily concerned with exploring personal identity through the roles played in both family and national history,” but disagree that gothic fiction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “reveals a kind of demonic history text, an alternative vision of American experience that reminds us of those marginal groups responsible for the guarding of the Gothic flame.” My study insists that the gothic fiction of established and well-received authors such as Poe, Stowe, Hawthorne, Sedgwick, and Wharton uncovers the flawed historical narratives written by equally established and well-received authors in the past. See Gross, Redefining the American Gothic from Wieland to Day of the Dead (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1989), 2.

Additionally, the work of Lawrence Buell and Cathy Davidson on gothic literature is based on a historical understanding of this literary mode. See especially Buell, New England
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the fictions of American identity that have been codified as foundational historical documents. Positioning themselves as a palimpsest upon earlier idealized histories, gothic texts “disrupt the dream world of national myth” (10). Extending her argument to the erratic structure that is characteristic of gothic literature, Goddu also explains that “in its narrative incoherence, the gothic discloses the instability of America’s self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity” (10).

Leslie Fiedler was one of the earliest critics to identify the psychological trauma expressed in American gothic literature from the perspective of the nation’s religious culture, and he speaks of the gothic as “a Calvinist exposé of natural human corruption” (160). However, Lawrence Buell takes a different approach to Fiedler’s observation and argues that “in New England gothic, the most distinctive thematic ingredient is the perception of Puritan culture as inherently grotesque” (359). Extending Buell’s argument, this study asserts that the New England gothic is frequently an exposé of Calvinist historical accounts of America and Americans. Moreover, in the process of exposing the flawed and unstable narratives that construct an artificial and uncomfortable identity for the nation, nineteenth-century gothic literature frequently proposes alternate versions of America, its history, its citizens, and its historians.

It is not surprising that when the five nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors discussed in this book address American historical narratives they all look to the work of Cotton Mather. His *Magnalia Christi Americana* was a prominent and dominant history of early New England.18 In his own time Mather had a large personality, and well into the nineteenth century he had an equally large reputation as a stiff and stern Puritan whom James Russell Lowell would later call a “conceited old pedant.”19 Furthermore, Mather was notoriously associated with the Salem witch trials of 1692, having served as secretary to the tribunal, after which he authored *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, a work that compiled many of the anecdotes of witchcraft that he heard throughout the trials. At the same time, Mather was not easily dismissed as a mere pedant or witch hunter from the distant past precisely

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because he was an acclaimed and compelling author. In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, thinkers and writers continued to recognize Mather as a brilliant rhetorician and artful writer. Despite his irreverent description of the author, James Russell Lowell admits that “with all his faults, that conceited old pedant contrived to make one of the most entertaining books ever written on this side of the water” (639).

Chapter two of this book accounts for the entertaining quality of book six of *Magnalia Christi Americana* by documenting the origins of the Puritan providence tale and exploring the novel ways in which Cotton Mather adapts the earlier literary forms for a contemporary audience. This chapter also ties the dramatic and sometimes flamboyant stylistic features of *Magnalia* to the book’s function in eighteenth-century New England. Subsequent chapters turn to the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Edith Wharton and contend that these authors recognize the importance of Mather’s work in codifying our understanding of American identity and shaping literary forms in the new nation, two distinct but related projects. Chapter three examines the work of Poe, whose “William Wilson,” “The Black Cat,” and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* form the mirror image of Mather’s providence tales. That is, they reflect Mather’s plots, characters, and even his language, but invert them to express Poe’s gothic view of providential design. The following chapter takes up Harriet Beecher Stowe’s New England novels and tales. Because of her conservative evangelical upbringing and her personal religious orientation, Harriet Beecher Stowe is much more sympathetic than Poe to the theological underpinnings of Cotton Mather’s writings, and her fiction gives evidence of her taste for the providence tales in *Magnalia*. Yet, Stowe’s work also reveals the uncanny ways in which she departs from Mather’s notion of religious leadership and narrative authority, just as she also refines aspects of Mather’s theology. Chapter five speaks to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s intellectual concerns regarding American providential historiography, which he identifies, to dramatic effect, with the person of Cotton Mather. Like Stowe, Hawthorne has a decidedly modern understanding of narrative authority. Further, he experiments with various fictional forms to express his discontent with earlier and contemporary historical tracts, and explores narrative voices and alternate modes of emplotment that are antithetical to those of Mather’s providence tales. The book concludes with two distinct perspectives on historical narrative. The final chapter begins with a consideration of Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*, a novel that centers
on a reconsideration of early American history and historians. *Hope Leslie* reflects the author's early training in providential literature, which she questions in her fiction and supplements with multiple and seemingly contradictory approaches to historical narrative. In this way, the novel's diffuse and even manic plot responds to the singular and definitive plots found in Mather's *Magnalia*. Like Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, Edith Wharton's New England tales contest the ownership of our national history. However, where Sedgwick gives voice to a multiplicity of historians who speak freely about their community, Wharton's historians are few, and they struggle to understand themselves and others and then to articulate their limited perceptions about their society. In distinct ways, each of the authors discussed in this book resists Mather's model for the historian and historical narrative.

This book does not claim that among the many novelists of nineteenth-century America only Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and Harriet Beecher Stowe respond to the words of Cotton Mather in their fiction and examine his work as a central feature of their own literary projects. To the contrary. Yet, because historical fiction in general was exceptionally popular in antebellum America, it is to be anticipated that authors of such novels and short stories would look to the work of one of the nation’s earliest and most prominent historians. Many critics have discovered that Herman Melville, for example, both incorporates Cotton Mather’s literary forms and challenges his religious tenets in his fiction. One can also identify authorial response to the themes, if not


the specific language and literary devices, of Cotton Mather in such works as Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok*, John Neal's *Rachel Dyer*, John Greenleaf Whittier's *Legends of New England*, and Henry David Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Indeed, the legacy of Mather's providence tales continues into the twentieth century in the work of Edith Wharton and many others. Since the publication of *Magnalia Christi Americana* in 1702, Cotton Mather has been recognized as the foremost author in the tradition of the providence tale and a champion of providential historiography. Likewise, more than the works of his celebrated father or any number of his contemporaries, the providential literature of Cotton Mather captured the imagination of his contemporary readers and continued to fascinate, puzzle, and disturb readers and writers long afterward.

T. Gilmore identified the influence of *Magnalia* in Melville's "Lightning-Rod Man" (9). Frank Davidson explores Melville's commentary on Calvinism in "The Apple-Tree Table" in which one character, irresolute in his religious faith, is shaken by reading *Magnalia* late into the night. His essay, "Melville, Thoreau, and "The Apple-Tree Table"" appeared in *American Literature* 25.4 (1954): 479–89. See also Marvin Fisher's "Bug and Humbug in Melville's 'Apple-Tree Table'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 8.3 (1971): 459–66.


22. These historical novels of Child and Neal are set in seventeenth-century New England and rely heavily on Mather's accounts of the characters and events the authors depict in their fiction. In addition to borrowing from *Magnalia*, in writing *Rachel Dyer*, Neal draws from Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*.


23. Although contemporary literature is outside the framework of this book, scholars have noted the continuing influence of the providence tale in Paul Aucther's *New York Trilogy*, Angela Carter's "Our Lady of the Massacre," and Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World*, among other late twentieth-century works of fiction.