

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Ava Chamberlain.** *The Notorious Elizabeth Tuttle: Marriage, Murder, and Madness in the Family of Jonathan Edwards.* North American Religions Series. New York: New York University Press, 2012. xiii + 257 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-2372-2.



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**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

*The Notorious Elizabeth Tuttle: Marriage, Murder, and Madness in the Family of Jonathan Edwards* is a book that embodies many characterizations. It is a biography of the “crazy” grandmother of the influential theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-58); a fascinating story of marriage, divorce, and their legal complexities in the colonial United States; a stark reminder that family life “back in the day” (as my students insist on saying) was not all roses and happiness; an argument that gender deviance powerfully affected both men and women in colonial America; a smart and beautifully analyzed insistence that historiography is neither boring nor irrelevant; and, most interesting to me, an example of how historically changing conceptions of madness “as a perhaps sad but routine aspect of human diversity, as deadly but individual deviance, as biological pollution that haunts families across generations” shaped the family stories, the historiography, and the theological interpretations of both Elizabeth Tuttle Edwards and her famed grandson Jonathan Edwards. Though she was considered of little relevance when living, differing interpretations of her life and madness enabled others to create variable and multiple portrayals of Elizabeth Tuttle Edwards for their own ideological debates. To others, she mattered more in death than in life.

Elizabeth Tuttle (b. 1645) married a cooper, Richard Edwards, in 1667. She gave birth to the first of her many children six months later in a situation of questionable paternity, and left the historical record in 1691 when the Connecticut General Court granted her husband’s petition for a divorce. In the years preceding her divorce, Elizabeth’s younger brother Benjamin murdered their sister Sarah, a court determined her brother David incompetent and placed him under guardianship, and her younger sister Mercy killed her own seventeen-year-old eldest son. Richard Edwards charged that his wife Elizabeth “Broake the Mariage Coviniant in Her obstinately Refusing Conjugal Comunion with mee Her Husband” (a serious breach of the marital contract); successfully petitioned for divorce on his second attempt; and left behind Elizabeth and the entire Tuttle family (p. 120).

Though Ava Chamberlain provides evidence of community opinion that Elizabeth was “not as guilty” as her husband wanted their neighbors to believe (p. 130), after the divorce the Edwards family waged a multigenerational and temporarily successful campaign of historical revisionism to erase Elizabeth and her tumultuous family from the Edwards line. For several generations historians obeyed, using language that conveyed the assumption that Richard Edwards’s first wife Elizabeth lived un-

eventfully and simply died at midlife, graciously leaving her husband to remarry. In the twentieth century, beginning with biographer Henry Bamford Parkes (*Jonathan Edwards: The Fiery Puritan* [1930]), Elizabeth reappeared as a rebellious wife of uncontrolled sexuality and a crazy grandmother who haunted intellectual and theological interpretations of Jonathan Edwards.

The figure of Elizabeth Tuttle Edwards grew to embody nearly everything except her own life. Indeed, she figured prominently in eugenic debates nearly three centuries after her undocumented, presumably lonely, and undated death. The famed eugenicist Charles Benedict Davenport (1866-1944) also discovered Elizabeth Tuttle Edwards, using her and the *âevil traitâ* she supposedly carried in her blood (presumably madness) as proof of the rightness of eugenics, and she became a staple example in the family studies that justified the eugenics movement. Anti-eugenicists, specifically those advocating against compulsory sterilization, also used Elizabeth as a political tool. Critics of eugenic legislation pointed out that if Elizabeth had been sterilized, such sterilization would have denied the world the brilliance of Jonathan Edwards and his similarly gifted descendants. Today she often appears in the Jonathan Edwards historiography as a titillating and entertaining detail. This array of uses conveys little about Elizabeth Tuttle Edwards, but an immense amount about the powerful nature of disability as an ideological weapon and the reason why an analysis of historiography matters.

Chamberlain writes beautifully, and in this book that

is half-biography, half-historiographical analysis, seeks to *âlistenâ* to the silences of Elizabeth Tuttle Edwards and give *âher* the opportunity to speak for herselfâ (p. 188). This, Chamberlain does successfully. She manages both her historical figures and her historical sources with an effective blend of compassion, respect, and rigorous analysis.

Though Chamberlain does not identify herself as a historian of disability, *The Notorious Elizabeth Tuttle* is a strong example of the riches wrought by using disability as a tool of analysis. The riches, however, could be even greater. I wish that Chamberlain had analyzed more rigorously the casting of Elizabeth as mad and incapacitated as it occurred during her lifetime. Chamberlain convincingly de-essentializes gender, acknowledging its historical construction and using that historical construction as powerful analysis. In contrast, she does not de-essentialize madness, and allows it to remain ungendered and unanalyzed both during Elizabeth Tuttle Edwards's lifetime and in the historiography.

Ultimately, Chamberlain's book is a powerful, useful, and smart work of history. As a classroom tool, it is valuable both for its content about the past (the *âhistoryâ* it contains) and for its method and historiographical analysis (the *âhistory of historyâ* it contains). Historians of disability, of theology, of eugenics, of gender, of colonial America, of marriage and divorce, and of madness, as well as those who simply love a good read, will enjoy this book.

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