
Michael J. Colacurcio’s *Godly Letters* poses a challenge for the reviewer. It is, in the author’s own words, a work of “summary analysis” (323). Proportionately, it is more summary than analysis, a fact delimiting a reviewer’s effort at any précis of nearly 600 closely-printed pages of text.

*Godly Letters* has a subject: the celebration of “the Big Books of the first generation” (xviii). This first generation was comprised of Puritan men with a deep emotional investment in their religious enterprise. They were, Colacurcio writes, “men of rare genius” who possessed “a complexity of imagination, a sudden suppleness of notice and of style, and an instinct for the pleasures and the pitfalls of extended composition” (xix).

But if, as Colacurcio’s statement indicates, *Godly Letters* has a big and broad subject, it is also unfortunately a book without a distinct thesis. It leaves the reader with the impression that its author believed or hoped that his sequential, close tracking of the religious arguments in a handful or so of Puritan works would somehow inherently yield a unifying thesis.

Instead of a thesis, there is a declaration of purpose: to identify “a literary story” about “a remarkable number of excellent books” (xii, 33), to recognize that “the prose of the first American Puritans is by itself an enormous literary fact” (555). It is indeed factually clear that early colonial Puritans wrote histories, autobiographies and sermons. What never comes into sharp focus in the welter of paraphrased theological argument and review of historical events comprising *Godly Letters*, is what exactly is meant by “literary.”

The word itself pops up sporadically, but to little avail in such claims as “happily, for our literary interests, not all Puritans stand together on all issues” (172); or “the highest sort of imaginative stress … bring[s] forth … a product we can appreciate as literary” (534-35). It is of no help at all to encounter vapory claims, such as “there are considerable stretches where [Thomas Hooker’s *Application of Redemption*] reads itself”; its “prose rejoices in its own vernacular conviction” (291).

Interestingly, one of Colacurcio’s observations about Hooker’s *Application* suggests a curious parallel to the reader’s experience of *Godly Letters*. Although Hooker’s sermons in *The Application* are thoroughly Ramist in struc-
ture, something odd happens at the end of this two-volume work. Hooker’s book, Colacurcio convincingly observes, “is radically incomplete” (323). This lack of finish is a seemingly peculiar outcome in an otherwise rigidly structured book promoting the methodology of preparationist theology. This incompletion is every bit as disappointing for the reader as (Colacurcio could have added) the ending of John Bunyan’s later *Pilgrim’s Progress*, which shuts down just as the reader most wants to see what lies behind the pearly gates of heaven.

When it comes to “final manifestation” or “perfect completion,” Colacurcio explains, “Hooker has no text to speak for ... transcendent possession. And he appears to know exactly what he has elided” (326, 328). Curiously, a similar incompletion and elision characterize *Godly Letters*, which promisingly guides readers on a pilgrimage through dense exegeses of theological argument and historical review only to abandon them at the end without a clear sense of any specific beyond-the-pearly-gate literary revelation.

However, something akin to a literary thesis seems to peck now and then from within the book’s hard shell of synopsized theological discourse. How the early colonial Puritan religious ideals pertaining to church and social order were challenged by the tumult of human experience emerges from time to time as a theme in *Godly Letters*. William Bradford’s elegiac narrative wrecks on the shoals of lost purpose, Thomas Shepard’s autobiography stages a life-drama of progressive discovery that arrives at no conclusion, Edward Johnson’s conservative history occasionally and inadvertently registers sentiments antithetical to its design as a practical support for Shepard’s theology and John Winthrop’s policies, and Winthrop’s journals mutate from records of experiential accidents brought under control to reports of irreparable ruptures ensuing from John Cotton’s controversial preaching in Massachusetts Bay. After Cotton’s arrival “Winthrop’s world has become all at once less simple and less easy to control, both in fact and in prose” (170).

These are, in short, narrative breakdowns resulting from the intersection of ambiguous “emergent occasion” and steadfast “genius and passion” (334). The works of the first generation of colonial Puritans, then, convey a sense of “repeated new departures” (574) from frustrated efforts which fail to arrive at some point of certainty. So, like Hooker’s *Application*, all of these books remain incomplete or marred. This, it appears, is the literary thesis which is
embedded in *Godly Letters* and which would have benefited from more
direct exposition in a more slender volume.

Not that this is a new thesis, of course. Studies of the many narrative
failures of Bradford’s history—“the dramatic posing of his problem is more
moving than anything his prose can conclude” (146)—have long ago set a
pattern for exploring the fault lines of early Puritan literature. Such narrative
instability, we now know, can be inadvertent or deliberate, even both simulta-
neously. Congregationalists practiced a decorum of imperfection, Charles W.
Mignon’s pertinent phrase for the self-conscious management of literary de-
fects akin to the intentional design flaws found in Puritan quilts and wood-
work.

But the good news about *Godly Letters* is that some of the books re-
viewed in it have never before been treated as worthy of special attention.
Colacurcio, who is extremely well-informed on recent insights into the tri-
umph of the preparationists over their more mystical peers, produces reli-
able, rich paraphrases and redactions of these books. In fact, his summaries
and sidebar comments, often speculating about what an author is thinking,
are far more enjoyable to read than the original works. It would be good
indeed if the enthusiasm and energy he has lavished on these books proved
to be contagious.

*Godly Letters* is a deeply informed resource for anyone with a keen interest
in the theological hairsplitting, the twists and turns of early colonial Calvinist
arguments. The center of the book, nearly 200 pages long, is aptly titled
“Doctrine.”

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Eric Jan Sluijter. *Rembrandt and the Female Nude.* Amsterdam University Press,
2006. 448pp. + 100 color, 250 b/w illus. $74.50/59.50 Euros. Review by
LARRY SILVER, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

Some scholarly projects have a vitality of their own, progressing from
particular studies to a richly layered synthesis. This book is one of those
projects, a masterwork by a mature and leading scholar fully in control of his
materials. Eric Jan Sluijter, professor of Dutch and Renaissance art history at
the University of Leiden, wrote his earlier studies exploring the Dutch visual-
ization of Greco-Roman myths as well as interpretive issues concerning the