

Keeping Up Appearances:
A Lacanian Perspective on American Mythmaking in
Augustus Saint-Gaudens' *The Puritan* (1886)

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The staggering toll of the Civil War burdened Americans long after General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse in the Spring of 1865. Reflecting on Milton and the aftermath of England's own civil war, T.S. Eliot questioned "whether any serious civil war ever does end,"¹ lamenting that the effects of a convulsed England were still felt even then in 1960, long after the Restoration of Charles II. Following the defeat of the Confederacy, a similarly morbid convulsion tore at the fabric of a grim-visaged Union. Despite the dismal failures of the Reconstruction period, the United States miraculously emerged into the Gilded Age of the late 19th century as a consolidated and industrializing nation in search of moral order². The concept of a collapse of meaning bodes well with the theories of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose dense but illuminating theories enable a better understanding of Augustus Saint-Gaudens' seminal work, *The Puritan* (1886) (fig. 1). This forlorn monument plays a fascinating role in a postbellum cultural landscape stained by the violent racial order of the South, the challenges of urban modernity in the North, and the final devastation of the Native Americans west of the Mississippi.



Fig. 1 Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *The Puritan*, 1886, bronze, Merrick Park, Springfield, Massachusetts.

Lacan professed that "psychoanalysis is the discipline which has reestablished the bridge linking modern man to the ancient myths."³ This bridge towards myth that inevitably runs through the unconscious lays bare the scaffolding of culture. Famously, for Lacan, the

¹ T. S. Eliot, *Milton: Two Studies* (Faber & Faber, 1968), 26.

² Ballard C. Campbell, "Understanding Economic Change in the Gilded Age," *OAH Magazine of History* 13, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 17.

³ Jacques Lacan, "The Freudian Thing," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (W.W. Norton, 1977), 114.

unconscious is structured like a language,⁴ operating in one part through chains of *signifiers* which comprise a register of experience called the Symbolic. This Symbolic order, in relation to its two counterparts the Imaginary and the Real, is anchored by a fundamental signifier, the Symbolic Father, also called the *Name-of-the-Father*.⁵ Not necessarily a literal father, the Name-of-the-Father represents the lawgiving and morally punitive function that confers identity and legitimacy to the subject, in a clinical sense; culturally, it represents the guarantor of the laws, rules, and authority that comprise society. It imposes meaning. If repressed, meaning collapses, and the subject falls back into the Imaginary order, the order of fantasy.

Saint-Gaudens' towering bronze, first unveiled in Springfield, Massachusetts on Thanksgiving Day in 1887, appears at first to exemplify the Name-of-the-Father as a dramatic consolidation of shared history and moral authority in an age of surfeited civic virtue. This is, however, only smoke and mirrors, a taste of the Lacanian *Imaginary*. In its embodiment of imagined Puritan virtue, it hides a dissonance between Puritanism, the artist, and an evolving nation struggling to define itself in its Gilded Age. Any meaningful study on *The Puritan*, particularly one dependent upon historical and social context, is indebted art historian Erika Doss. Her painstaking work in "Augustus Saint-Gaudens's *The Puritan*: Founders' Statues, Indian Wars, Contested Public Spaces, and Anger's Memory in Springfield, Massachusetts" (2012) is a key interlocutor that provides rather crucial social and cultural contexts surrounding the statue. Where Doss presents a comprehensive socio-political account, this paper approaches *The Puritan* from a distinctly psychoanalytic perspective, expanding her insights through Lacanian theory. In doing so, I argue that, in the wake of cultural uncertainty following the

⁴ Jacques Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (W.W. Norton, 1977), 147.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (W.W. Norton, 1977), 199.

American Civil War, Saint-Gaudens' *The Puritan* (1886) functions as a compensatory and contradictory fantasy of moral authority; as a foreboding yet caricatural paternal archetype, it *fails* as a Lacanian signifier of the Symbolic Father, exposing the fragility and ultimately the neurosis of Gilded Age mythmaking. Upon interrogation of *The Puritan* in the ideological significance of its patronage, its formal contradictions, and finally, its psychic disfigurement through parody, my paper uncovers how civic art does not simply reflect ideology, it actively constructs and performs it as a symptom of a mythmaking society.

Augustus Saint-Gaudens, born in Dublin in 1848 to an Irish mother and a French father, emigrated to New York with his family six months after his birth. He describes the city as inciting in him a real “male pugnacity”⁶; it was here in his youth where the ambitious young Saint-Gaudens found a fruitful apprenticeship with cameo cutter Louis Avet while studying at Cooper Union and the National Academy of Design⁷. From 1867 to 1870 the burgeoning artist found himself abroad studying at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris under the tutelage of sculptor Francois Jouffroy⁸ (fig. 2). His exposure to, and later rejection of, Neo-Classical statuary greatly influenced the unpretentious naturalistic style he would cultivate in the states after a stint in Rome from 1870 to 1872, where he not only fell in love with his wife, Augusta, but also with the



Fig. 2 Francois Jouffroy, *The Secret of Venus*, 1839, marble, Louvre Museum, Paris.

⁶ Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *The Reminiscences of Augustus Saint-Gaudens: Volume One*, ed. Homer Saint-Gaudens (New York: The Century Co., 1913), 20.

⁷ Libby W. Seaberg, assisted by Cherene Holland, “Artists’ Biographies,” in *200 Years of American Sculpture*, ed. Whitney Museum of American Art (David R. Godine, 1976), 306.

⁸ *Ibid.* See *The Secret of Venus* (fig. 2), which Saint-Gaudens waxes poetic about in his memoir.

works of Renaissance sculptor Donatello.⁹ Upon his eventual return to his studio in New York, he met his longtime friend and collaborator, architect Stanford White, who would later build the pedestal for *The Puritan* and other works¹⁰. Once back in the States, Saint-Gaudens' commissions were instrumental in the popularity of the Beaux-Arts movement on American art. His first major commission, the Admiral David Farragut Monument from 1881, began a series of high-profile jobs for wealthy, upper-class patrons who embraced the artist's trajectory away from Neo-Classicism towards a distinctly American style which was naturalistic and characteristically conservative as opposed to the excesses of the French Neo-Classical.¹¹ Saint-Gaudens maintained his livelihood primarily on a parallel demand for small replicas of his major works that produced royalty income¹². Reductions like the ever-popular statuette of *The Puritan*, a purported favorite of Tiffany & Co.¹³, alongside his regular public monuments¹⁴ and funerary memorials, solidified his reputation as one of the most beloved artists of his time. While finishing his final major public memorial, the equestrian statue of General Sherman with *Victory* unveiled in 1903, the ailing artist, having been diagnosed with cancer, lived in the Cornish Art Colony in New Hampshire, producing a steady stream of reductions and smaller memorials. Saint-Gaudens died in 1907.

Inseparable from the art of Saint-Gaudens is his relationship to his patrons and their Gilded Age world. Infamous 'robber barons' like Rockefeller and Vanderbilt bankrolled programs of pedagogic propaganda through art and architecture that gave life to an emergent

⁹ "Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907)," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/augustus-saint-gaudens-1848-1907>

¹⁰ Seaberg, assisted by Holland, "Artists' Biographies," 306.

¹¹ ***Saint-Gaudens Seminar on YouTube (come back here)

¹² Daniel Robbins, "Statues to Sculpture: From the Nineties to the Thirties," in *200 Years of American Sculpture*, ed. Whitney Museum of American Art (David R. Godine, 1976), 137.

¹³ ***Saint-Gaudens Seminar on YouTube (come back here)

¹⁴ See *Standing Abraham Lincoln*, *Shaw Memorial*, and the *Adams Memorial*.

American exceptionalism. For example, The Chicago World's Fair from 1893 flaunted neoclassical architecture, didactic statuary, and, most damningly, anthropological dioramas of barbarous villages to project "shared" American ideals of harmony, purity, and superiority. The American Renaissance, then, has its roots in a perceived national inheritance as the harbingers of civilization. This important context informs *The Puritan's* impetus in a number of interesting ways. In 1881, after the dedication of the Farragut Monument, Saint-Gaudens received his commission by railroad tycoon Chester W. Chapin for a sculpture of his ancestor, the Deacon Samuel Chapin (1598-1675), a 17th century settler and magistrate of the Massachusetts Bay Colony¹⁵. Chester Chapin was a tried-and-true tycoon, commandeering steamship lines and railroads in New England, enjoying profane amounts of profit from both. Chapin and his new class of industry magnates sought legitimacy.¹⁶ The reality of the civic program promulgated by elites like Chester Chapin, however, is that the cracks in Gilded Age mythmaking were apparent to many at the time, perhaps most famously to Mark Twain, who jokingly asks in the eponymous book *The Gilded Age* (1873): "What is the chief end of man? – to get rich. In what way? – dishonesty if we can; honesty if we must."¹⁷

A stern moral righteousness evokes Deacon Chapin, whose life from 1598 to 1675 encompassed much of the turbulent history of the Puritan ideology in England and the American colonies. The *mythemes* of Early American history, as French anthropologist and Lacan's mentor Claude Lévi-Strauss¹⁸ would call them, are the building blocks of the prevailing narrative for America's foundational era. In it, Puritans, dour but virtuous killjoys with broad-brimmed hats

¹⁵ Philip Deloria, "Ghosts on the Landscape of Memory and Meaning," in *Monuments and Myth: The America of Sculptors Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French* (American Federation of Arts, 2023), 34.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ ****Gilded Age* (come back here)

¹⁸ The concept of the Symbolic Order owes much to the work of Levi-Strauss, especially the idea of the social world being structured by the words we use,

traipse through an untamed wilderness to build a ‘city on a hill’ in evasion of far-away tyrants lording over a pseudo-medieval Europe. Though regularly challenged as fiction,¹⁹ this myth or memory of ancestral virtue has nonetheless shaped—often subconsciously—cultural and ideological movements throughout American history. Puritanism’s development into an ideology reflective of selective mythmaking will therefore provide a necessary means of properly introducing Lacan’s theories.

“Puritan,” the elusive pejorative,²⁰ originated as an insult used by Anglicans in the Elizabethan era to mock reformist groups seeking to ‘purify’ the Church of England of its Popish remnants.²¹ Unable to institutionalize their radical beliefs in England, certain separatists journeyed to North America in the hopes of establishing a church free of state interference. This Puritan project gave rise to oligarchies²² ran as exclusive theocracies, fragmented and marred by violent conflicts erupting earliest in the Pequot War, most brutally in King Philip’s War. Their art was sparse and utilitarian, limited to crude portraiture.²³ Doss cites historian Jill Lepore, who notes that the devastation of King Philip’s War in particular helped forge an American identity rooted in “violence and suspicion.”²⁴ Parallel but distant struggles over popular sovereignty, piety, and constitutionalism survived the English Civil War,²⁵ flourishing in America as civic

¹⁹ Sacvan Bercovitch, Perry Miller (most famously), and Carla Pestana are wonderful scholars in this regard.

²⁰ Already by the production of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* in 1601/1602, ‘Puritan’ was an insult levied at the self-righteous character Malvolio.

²¹ ***This is true, but I need something besides a cursory Wikipedia page (come back here).

²² Plymouth (1620), Massachusetts Bay (1630), and Rhode Island (1636), all with differing approaches to authority and liberty.

²³ ***This is also true, but I need a definitive source (come back here).

²⁴ Erika Doss, “Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s *The Puritan*: Founders’ Statues, Indian Wars, Contested Public Spaces, and Anger’s Memory in Springfield, Massachusetts.” *Winterthur Portfolio* 46, no. 4 (December 2012): 237–70.

²⁵ During the reigns of despot-aspirants King James I and King Charles I, the perceived medievalisms of the Anglican church angered more and more of the English laity as Puritanism reached its zenith in the wake of the English Civil War in 1642, a crucial event in the history of liberalism and the enlightenment, as it anticipated both movements in a practically unprecedented Parliamentary victory over monarchism. The 1640s marked a watershed moment for Puritanism as a political philosophy and a religious philosophy; at the execution of Charles I and the institution of the English Commonwealth, Puritan ideology essentially catapulted into the global spotlight. For further reading—see, Christopher Hill.

virtues integral to the identity of Colonial Americans, the ideals of the Founding Fathers, and the fantasies of generations thereafter.

This is the world Samuel Chapin inhabited—likely arriving in Massachusetts between 1630 and 1635 at the outset of the Pequot War, eventually settling in Springfield by 1643. A civic figure until his death in 1675 (just after Springfield was ravaged during King Philip’s War), Chapin’s life directly intersects with the turbulent contradictions of early Colonial America.

The violent context in which Samuel Chapin lived retroactively suggests the mode of repression utilized by later historiographies of Colonial America. In the idealized, commemorative rendering of Chapin by Saint-Gaudens two hundred years later, these morally complicated aspects of the Puritan project are missing, but they exist, nonetheless. The trauma, moral uncertainty, and abject violence of Chapin’s life *resists* integration into Saint-Gaudens’ mythologized representation but haunts it nonetheless; it is what Jacques Lacan would categorize as the *Real*, the chaotic which escapes symbolization and becomes Othered²⁶. The tension between what is seen and what is implied is key to a Lacanian understanding of the Puritanism’s reconfiguration by Saint-Gaudens—and this is to say nothing of the moral implications brought into the fold by slavery, an issue relevant in Saint-Gaudens’ childhood but omitted referentially in *The Puritan*.

²⁶ An aside on the decline of American Puritanism—it waned gradually, with succeeding generations losing zeal. Massachusetts became a royal colony with an Anglican governor after the Glorious Revolution in England, and the Salem Witch Trials fiasco in 1692 weakened Puritan cultural authority. The movement devolved into separate congregational churches (Presbyterians, etc.) by the early 18th century—they became broadly “evangelical.”



Fig. 3 Freake Painter/Freake-Gibbs Painter, *Elizabeth Clarke Freake and Baby Mary*, 1671-74, oil on canvas, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.

To illustrate these concepts, we return to the crude portraiture of colonial art. The austere portrait of *Elizabeth Clarke Freake and Baby Mary* (fig. 3) by the Freake Painter provides a thematically relevant case-study to quickly but more fully introduce Lacan's Borromean Knot. We can assert that, as an antecedent of *The Puritan*, the Freake portrait operates in a kind of Symbolic order that foregrounds idealized virtues while repressing material realities.

Lacan's concept of the Borromean Knot²⁷, formalized in the 1970s, is a topological interlinking of three rings that posits the unconscious as a system of three interconnected and interdependent registers representing the structure of human subjectivity: the *Imaginary*, the *Symbolic*, and the *Real*²⁸. The Imaginary order, to Lacan, comprises dreams, illusory ideals, and cohesive fantasies, somewhat like a Platonic form. But unlike Plato, Lacan finds the ideal false. The Imaginary is a necessary illusion, an aspirational idea of both the subject and the viewer²⁹. In the Freake portrait, the Imaginary resides in the formal elements that engage an ego, the projected fantasy of domesticity; this would be symmetry, balance, expression, and, for something more specific, a coherent maternity. The Symbolic order is akin to iconography, such that it constructs meaning through a network of signifiers, or, if easier to understand, symbols. It builds interpretive structure through reference and deference to codes, rules and laws that dictate

²⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXII: RSI (1974–1975)*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished translation, School of Psychotherapy at St. Vincent's University Hospital, 2005), 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁹ It's also dualistic—in a clinical sense, one's Imaginary order comprises two egoic consciousnesses split during the Mirror Stage.

culture. In the Freake portrait, the Symbolic comprises, among other things, the fine lace implying status, the child's implication of lineage, or, again, maternity. Because the registers of the unconscious are interdependent, elements fulfill different functions where required by the structure of a subject. The final order, the Real, for Lacan, would be what this painting represses, what is absent and unrepresentable that resists the Symbolic and the Imaginary; the suppressed trauma, death, violence, moral failure, and exploitation of the colonial experience. The Imaginary and Symbolic rely on the Real to forego wholeness, and the knot ultimately orbits an unattainable object of desire or longing at its center³⁰, which drives the subject forward. If nothing else, the primary takeaway of Lacan is this: "Desire is a relation of being to lack. The lack is the lack of being, properly speaking."³¹

Longing at the heart of the Freake portrait is a lack, a desire for completeness. The Freake portrait signifies Puritan identity through an idealized image coded with cultural meaning, but it's ineffably *haunted* by what it cannot represent: the Real. The Real is not *reality*, per se, but the void that all ideologies, images, and history conceal³². For Lacan, history is not a linear procession or sequence of progress but a repetition of what cannot be resolved or properly symbolized, embodied by the Real³³. The unresolved Real of the Freake portrait thus resurfaces in the cultural upheavals in the postbellum era, rotted and derelict beyond what Nathaniel

³⁰ Lacan, *XXII*, 71. Called *objet petit a*, ostensibly lowercase o 'other,' in Lacan's seminars. I refuse to engage further technically with the concept in this paper, lest it be double the word limit. I believe this sentence is summative enough.

³¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (W.W. Norton, 1978), 235.

³² Somewhat analogous to a Jungian shadow, but crucially different in that it conveys the eternal impossibility of wholeness rather than the possibility of reconciliation and integration.

³³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (W.W. Norton, 1991), 51.

Hawthorne could exorcise, now in the hands of a sculptor at once intrigued and scornful of the Symbolic order attached to the Puritan myth.

In restaging the Puritan mode, Saint-Gaudens first constructs the Imaginary. *The Puritan* looms menacingly tall on his pedestal, trampling over foliage underfoot through what is presumably a woodland in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. His stiff severity is underscored at first glance by the shadowy recession created by the spatial alignment of the large brim of his hat and the exaggeratedly large, popped collar that encapsulates his stern, wrinkled face, modelled officially after Chester Chapin, or, as some historians theorize, the abolitionist John Brown³⁴. His downturned gaze is unyielding and silently confident. His thick, billowing coat creates the bulk of his volume, and frames the piece itself. Cradled in his left arm is an enormous bible, massive enough to displace his coat on top of it, and with his right hand he holds a walking-stick. The Deacon is mid-step but shows no sign of any physical strain or disturbance. From the front, his composition is that of a balanced diamond, thickest at the horizontal axis created by the arms and accentuated by the angle of the walking stick. This calls attention to the point of the hat, the stance of the feet, and the two objects held in his hands. In profile, he slightly leans back as he strides in a staggered stance, still weightless as though entirely in control. This, combined with the severity of the bronze itself and the strong composition creates an initial tone of stark, foreboding, and emanating authority. In Lacanian terms, these formal qualities do not merely render a Puritan—they mirror the fantasy of what a Puritan ought to be: impenetrable, paternal, unified. But something's off about this Puritan. The parodic nature of these formal elements, the theatricality of the performance, and Saint-Gaudens' own reflections on the statue suggest that

³⁴ Deloria, "Ghosts," 34.

this representation is more satire than documentary; that there is a Symbolic subversion, and thus, the Real bleeds through.

Beneath the bronze is a living, breathing caricature. His grave countenance, stoic though it may be, is overwrought by its drama and parody. He's reminiscent of Hester Prynne's dogmatic oppressors in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a book widely circulated by the time of Saint-Gaudens' adulthood. As opposed to the textually-confined Puritans of Hawthorne, however, Deacon Chapin's spatial relationship with the viewer, his placement as a civic object in a public space, gives him the advantage of dynamism, of interactivity and subjectivity. He is functionally alive, a fact aided by Saint-Gaudens' virtuosity. His isolation, high above the ground, commanding his space, separates his person from the community as a self-possessed patriarch. This distance did not readily appeal to the residents of Springfield.

Doss explores the pitfalls of the statue's original site as a remarkably contested public space. At its dedication, *The Puritan* stood triumphant at the end of a renovated lawn in Stearns Square across from a fountain which was surrounded by four charmingly small bronze turtles spouting water³⁵. At the edge of the fountain was a bronze sphere on a granite pedestal, decorated with two cheerful fish, mouths agape. The irony of the scene is not lost on Jennifer Greenhill, author of *Playing It Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age*, who persuasively insists on the sophisticated satire of *The Puritan*'s original setting, calling attention to the contrast of a dour and solemn figure staring down adorable turtles and frolicking fish across the lawn³⁶. It was almost immediately unpopular, garnering swift ire from the working class locals, especially their children; Doss mentions that an issue from the Springfield Republican at the time

³⁵ Doss, "The Puritan," 262.

³⁶ Heather Campbell Coyle, review of *Playing It Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age* by Jennifer Greenhill, *Studies in American Humor*, 3, no. 27 (2013): 220.

reported that the “noble Deacon” and his park were often overrun with “riotous children, who do not hesitate to make the statue a target for stones and sticks.”³⁷ Doss reasons that much of the negative feedback came from a perceived imposition in a formerly free public space, one a block away from a congested working-class neighborhood. The stark working class divides across the nation were keenly felt by those frustrated with the aristocratic antics of “new money” industrialists whose massive wealth afforded leisure and pompous intellectualism³⁸. The locals continually vandalized the lawn, leading to the statue being moved to its current site, Merrick Park, after much deliberation by city officials.³⁹ This disheartening failure of Springfield’s “city beautiful” moralizing dissuaded further attempts and relegated *The Puritan* to its current, less-agitating site in front of the Christ Church Cathedral (a vestige of the Anglican institution Deacon Chapin fled). At Merrick Park, removed from the context of the fountain, the statue still suffers a discernable parody.

The oversized book lugged around by *The Puritan* is really a *blatant* parody. His comically large bible (a fact known from a later Philadelphia version of the statue called *The Pilgrim*) is a crux of any analysis. I offer a point of divergence from Doss, here—she aptly and rightly interprets parody as a vehicle for Saint-Gaudens’ (and many others’) “undisguised disdain for New England Puritan traditions,”⁴⁰ at the behest of “new values [that] altered the vision that many Americans had of what their culture ideally ought to be.”⁴¹ Aside from a retroactive commentary on the fraught relationship between colonists and Native Americans⁴², however,

³⁷ Doss, “*The Puritan*,” 264.

³⁸ ***PBS Documentary (come back here)

³⁹ Doss, “*The Puritan*,” 268.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 262. Historically, scriptural accessibility and concurrent literacy were two extremely important aspects of Puritan proselytizing, notwithstanding the social and legal authority vested in the printed bible, so copies were very often small-format, or quarto-sized.

Saint-Gaudens very likely modeled the oversized bible also as a mockery of Chester Chapin. Doss describes a studio assistant who recalled that, for Saint-Gaudens, “The pressure for money was always unbearable.”⁴³ Though nominally friends, I believe the discontent of the Real, the pressure of recognition and financial pressure in the form of distaste for Chapin on Saint-Gaudens’ part, is exposed in the statue either by happenstance or on purpose. As a grotesque and ludicrous signifier of textual authority, this bible is an extension of Chapin’s inflated sense of authority, of his excess. In Doss, the historical reality of cheap and portable bibles being common and convenient in the colonies insofar as they provided a “mechanism of colonial power and domination, as instruments of dispossession”⁴⁴ that threatened the livelihoods of Native Americans is nonetheless important for this study, and these insights work together. The conversion efforts of the early settlers ultimately failed, and this too is mocked by Saint-Gaudens. Deacon Chapin holds a King James Bible, folio-sized, a hefty tome symbolic of Anglican tyranny, anachronistically emphasizing the authoritarianism of the Puritans.⁴⁵ Chapin is himself hefty, straining under his half-undone doublet. This, in conjunction with his disapproving frown, elicits a kind of powerful comic element apparent upon investigation of the contradictions displayed.

Both Freud and Lacan took very seriously the implications of humor and its place in the psyche. Amplifying Freud’s original theories in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Lacan understood humor in a similar manner to his surrealist contemporaries, as what psychoanalyst Patricia Gherovici calls “hilariously incongruous juxtapositions.”⁴⁶ On the

⁴³ Ibid., 242.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 257.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 258.

⁴⁶ Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler, *Lacan, Psychoanalysis, and Comedy* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3.

destabilizing, transgressive nature of these juxtapositions, Lacan in *Seminar VII* suggests that jokes allows the subject to momentarily confront (but not resolve) the Real; “humor consists in producing a meaning effect by putting the superego in its place.”⁴⁷ The superego here is analogous to the Symbolic Father, the internalized authority figure. Humor empowers the subject, then, to approach serious and perhaps unspeakable criticisms of power structures.

Furthermore, if this is taken in conjunction with Freud’s idea of the joke as a discharge of repressed psychic energy⁴⁸, Saint-Gaudens perhaps derived a sordid pleasure from the cruel joke imbued into his monumental work. In later seminars (*Seminar XX*, as an example), Lacan even associates laughter with the *jouissance*⁴⁹ of confronting the Real. It’s laughter that’s not just funny, but unsettling. There is thus an uneasy irony of a dutiful Puritan bogged down in the trappings of his age and the excesses of his ancestor’s.

Doss brings up interesting pieces of evidence that support this Freudo-Lacanian view on parody. From his memoir and assorted letters, it’s apparent that Saint-Gaudens was inclined towards lewd humor. He often signed his letters to Stanford White “KMA,” an abbreviation of “Kiss My Ass.”⁵⁰ His correspondences are full of caricatures and mockeries. For example, see the sketch by the artist of himself and lifelong friend Mark Twain titled “An Exchange of

⁴⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (W.W. Norton, 1992), 304.

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 8 (Hogarth Press, 1960), 190. “The essence of the joke lies in the economy of psychic expenditure.”

⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge (1972–1973)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (W.W. Norton, 1998), 11. Another opaque concept I magnanimously refuse to engage with in-text. For Lacan it represents a paradoxically extreme pleasure. *Jouissance* transgresses beyond the ‘pleasure principle,’ inciting a confrontation with the Real.

⁵⁰ Doss, “*The Puritan*,” 254.

Compliments Between Mark Twain and Augustus St. Gaudens.” (fig. 4)⁵¹ Twain’s specific irreverence towards Puritans, highlighted by Doss, is especially fascinating in that Twain’s own farces, as exemplified in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), involve transpositions of

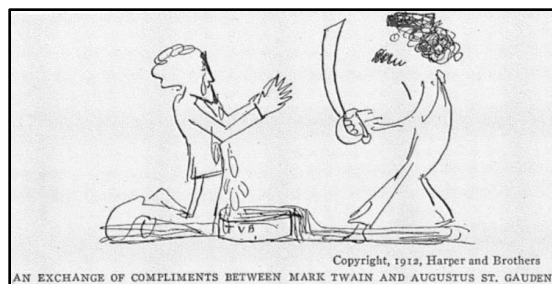


Fig. 4 Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *An Exchange of Compliments between Mark Twain and Augustus Saint-Gaudens*, 1912. Drawing. *The Bookman* 36, no. 5 (January 1913): 490. Hesburgh Library, University of Notre Dame.

time as reflections on the “wonders and absurdities of the truths constructed by their own historical moments.”⁵² Gherovici describes Twain and other satirists as “unveiling the ‘errors’ that have been made into necessary ‘facts’ by any given time period.”⁵³ Saint-Gaudens, Twain, and their circle of like-minded cosmopolitan friends would frequent profligate boys’ clubs,⁵⁴ clandestine retreats from social expectations of the Gilded Age, where they’d engage often in extramarital debauchery. It becomes no surprise, then, that *The Puritan* wears on its cartoonishly billowing sleeve the personal inclinations of a cosmopolitan wit with a working-class background and connections to the underbelly of bourgeois society.

On the creation of the statue, Saint-Gaudens himself admits that he was not content with a simple portrait—that he wanted to “capture the *essence* of the Puritan.”⁵⁵ His confession is revelatory. This desire marks a decisive pivot away from historical representation and into the realm of our Lacanian Imaginary. Against the formal illusion of moral coherence, the Symbolic functions of *The Puritan* betray its sincerity *and* its authority. The statue does not commemorate; it compensates. What it compensates for, of course, is the Name-of-the-Father introduced at the

⁵¹ Ibid., 255.

⁵² Gherovici and Steinkoler, *Lacan, Psychoanalysis, and Comedy*, 11.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Doss, “*The Puritan*,” 254.

⁵⁵ Saint-Gaudens, *Reminiscences*, 354.

beginning of this study. In the original French, *Nom-du-Père* sounds like *Non-du-Père*, or “No-of-the-Father,” a characteristically Lacanian play on words.⁵⁶ “No” is also the verbal expression of the Father’s function as a disciplinarian. This signifier of law, order, and paternal authority is also the fundamental signifier, and its failure constitutes a cataclysmic collapse of meaning⁵⁷.

Saint-Gaudens’ disciplinarian is hampered by his exaggerated bible, a mocking overcompensation for authority; his self-assured imperiousness; the artist’s own sardonic ambivalence; and, generally, the skeptical humor of its original setting.

Consider, as a comparison, Daniel Chester French’s *Minute Man* (1874) (fig. 5), which constructs a similar Borromean Knot. Unlike the ironic ambiguity of *The Puritan*, French’s *Minute Man* signifies a true moral clarity and a patriotic resolve born of its ardent movement forward, its upturned gaze, and its everyman temperament that embodies hope and resilience. Its Symbolic order is held together sincerely and contains the Real. It performs and inhabits the Name-of-the-Father perfectly, bestowing on its viewer a restrained sense of duty and civic virtue. This young farmer stepping away from his plow to pick up his musket references the violence of the American Revolution, certainly, but this abject violence remains well-sutured into the chain of signifiers that operate alongside the Imaginary and the Real to create the Subject and orbit desire. *The Puritan*, caricatural in its symbolism, *attempts* to signify law, order, and paternal authority, but does so with a theatrical excess that compromises its integrity. More King Lear than Moses,



Fig. 5 Daniel Chester French, *The Minute Man*, 1874, bronze, Minute Man National Historical Park, Concord, Massachusetts.

⁵⁶ Marilyn Johns Blackwell, “Strindberg’s Early Dramas and Lacan’s “Law of the Father,”” *Scandinavian Studies*, 71, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 313.

⁵⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III, 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (W.W. Norton, 1993), 195.

Deacon Chapin is rendered impotent by the failure to signify the Name-of-the-Father, projecting parody rather than order. In failing to convincingly ‘name the Father,’ the statue reveals the absence at the core of American foundational myths; the Symbolic Order collapses, and the rotted Real erupts. The nature of the Borromean Knot is such that one link breaking throws the others into disorder, and the failure or disfigurement of the Symbolic Father therefore compromises the Imaginary; Deacon Chapin’s fantasy is so overstated that it cracks under pressure, exposing the contradictions of the pedagogic program of not just Gilded Age mythmaking, but the entire unconscious chain of American history. In unraveling the myth of Puritanism, Saint-Gaudens reveals the neurosis of his age, as the trauma and repression not contained by the Symbolic order in collapse into disarray, exposing the repressed violence, instability, and anxiety it seeks to obscure. In keeping up appearances, Deacon Chapin wears his paternity as a costume, not as a conviction.

As an instrument of consolidating cultural hegemony, Deacon Chapin ought to succeed. Nonetheless, his subversive parody, his hollowness, complicated more-so by a retroactive capturing of a constructed American past, betrays his authority. A fervent witness to the tribulations of the Civil War⁵⁸ and the postbellum era, Saint-Gaudens saturated his Puritan with a destabilized Lacanian longing for an unattainable fantasy of lost virtue, inherited burdens, and moral restoration, projected onto a hyper-dramatized father figure meant to stabilize a disoriented symbolic order at the behest of his industrialist patron. Ultimately, Saint-Gaudens’ ‘failure’ is a self-same revelation that lambasts the ideological underpinnings of Gilded Age America. The Real is its morbid punchline.

⁵⁸ Saint-Gaudens, *Reminiscences*, 19.

Central to Lacanian psychoanalysis are two motifs—*impossibility* and *contradiction*. In *The Puritan* a cacophony of these motifs unfolds; the sublimation of national trauma, the nostalgic yearning for a feigned moral past, a hauntological struggle over the myth of the earliest Americans— if we take Lacan at his most legible, withholding accusations of theory-mongering, the Borromean Knot exacerbates these struggles, confronting the inadequacy of *The Puritan*'s conventional reading as a solemn paragon of wayward heroism. Saint-Gaudens' enduring codification of the Puritan myth, a crumbling artifact of the Real, flagrantly invokes a paternal image of ancestral virtue and aspires desperately to the Name-of-the-Father. It fails in a Lacanian sense but performs flawlessly as a specter of national trauma in the guise of mythology. In its formal and psychological disfigurement, and by the nature of its medium, *The Puritan* is destined to endlessly reenact an irreconcilable relationship between myth and memory, forever pushing forward into the shadows of American history.

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