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Alternative Publications: Passing Notes

Welcome to the lecture “Alternative Publications: Passing Notes” in this course! Let's start with a basic question: how would you publish a book, or a shorter text, like an essay? We normally think we can do something like this: bring the text of our book or essay to a printer or a publishing house, negotiate a contract and have them agree to publish the text, and then have them print many copies of it to distribute. Or, we might think of something similar. However, what is another way to publish, that doesn't involve a formal publisher or printer? Is there a way to sidestep this model, and what would be the alternative or alternatives? In this lecture we will discuss another model for publishing, which has been called “scribal publication” by scholars. A large portion of this lecture pulls on David D Hall's discussion of scribal publication in his book *Ways of Writing*. In this lecture I'll first give some different definitions of the term “scribal publication,” move onto some prominent examples of it, and then suggest what this reveals about the Puritans. The learning goals for you are to be able to provide a definition of scribal publication; to give one or two examples of it amongst the Puritans; and to identify one or two ways it can tell us more about the Puritans. By the way, I also discuss the notion of publication in the lecture about Native communication systems, if you want to investigate publication from another angle.

Let me start with some background and terminology about handwritten texts amongst the Puritans. While we know that the Puritans printed texts, as seen in many surviving printed sermons, pamphlets, and essays from the period, they also used handwritten texts for various purposes. Scholars call handwritten texts manuscripts, and they frequently contrast manuscripts with printed texts.

Now, let's define scribal publication. Scholars call the circulation of manuscripts, or handwritten versions of a text, “scribal publication.” Scholar David D. Hall describes some of the practices of the Puritans as “scribal publication.” Here's Hall's description of “scribal publication” in his own words: “Any text that existed in one or more handwritten copies can be considered published. This definition encompasses a text in an author's handwriting that he shared with others as well as what Harold Love has named ‘user’ publication, the making of copies (perhaps no more than one) by someone else” (*Ways* 33). Hall assumes that publication at minimum involves at least one copy of a text. He says “any text that existed in one or more handwritten copies can be considered published.” So even if one person copied down someone's freshly-written essay, that essay would be considered published, for Hall. Also, according to Hall's description there are two distinct ways to execute scribal publication. One way is for the author to make copies of his own material. The other way is for other people to make copies of the material. The term seems expansive enough to cover a variety of situations, from one reader making copies of a text and sharing it with several circles, to several readers making a copy of a text to share with their own immediate circle, to the author and reader both making copies, and so forth.

One thing I want to note about scribal publication is that the practice of scribal publication, actually, makes us reconsider what “publication” itself is. This is because it shows us different versions of publication where the author and reader have different roles. If we thought of publication as a vetting process by someone who is not the author, then we might only consider “user publication” actual scribal publication. User publication is when those who want to read the manuscript or who have read it make copies of it. In that case publication would be

about a mechanism separate from the author; it would be about a separate group of people who seem to control the text and define it anew.

We might not normally think of publication as self-publication, in which what is published is only what the author authorizes to be passed around. Yet, scribal -publication encompasses this view of publication, which highlights the role of the author, their intentions, and the effects of their actions. This would look like a situation in which the author carefully prepared manuscripts and made sure they were passed out only to a certain group. Another way to look at publication is that it means sharing texts openly with everyone and anyone in society. We might argue that sharing handwritten versions with only limited amounts of people, such as one's family members, which is an example Hall describes, does not count as publication. It would just be called "sharing a text." So scribal publication makes us think critically about the role of the author and the "publisher," or whoever makes the decision to circulate something more openly. It makes us consider if we should consider the author to have the most say in what is published, or if their opinion does not matter.

Let's review some information about print publication in New England quickly to give some context for scribal publication. The printing press first arrived in 1638 in New England. Some of the most popular printed books, besides the Bible, were the Bay Psalm book, a collection of psalms presented as hymn lyrics, printed in 1640; the *Platform of church Discipline*, printed in 1649; and what is known as the Eliot Indian Bible, a Bible translated into the Wampanoag language, first printed in 1661. Puritans did use the printing press for a variety of their works. But there might be a variety of reasons scribal publication was used instead of print publication. One reason is that print publication was not an option from 1630-1638, the colonists' first several years in New England. The printing press hadn't arrived yet. Thus many texts having to do with the Antinomian controversy, in Anne Hutchinson disagreed with some mainstream ministers and was brought to trial, were all written by hand. These include the account of her trial and some of the points of disagreements ministers had with John Cotton, who was Hutchinson's pastor (Hall *Ways* 56).

Let's look at some specific examples of scribal publication. One of the most prominent examples are writings by John Winthrop. I discussed him and his significance in my lecture, "Why do the Puritans matter today?" One of his most famous sermons, "A Modell of Christian Charitie," which has the well-known line, "wee shall be as a city on a hill" actually was published via manuscript. It never came out in print during his lifetime. It was first requested as a manuscript copy in 1635 by a friend of Winthrop's son, John jr. Winthrop (Hall, *Ways* 30). Then other manuscript copies circulated. Actually, no writings at all by Winthrop came out in print during his lifetime. His famous journal was not printed, for example, but excerpts of it passed through different groups (Hall, *Ways* 36). Also Winthrop might even have intended his journal to be scribally published and read because he tried to record various "providences," or special moves of God in it. Providences are supposed to be spiritually encouraging to those who hear about them, so it seems that Winthrop would have wanted these parts to be read (Hall, *Ways* 79). Winthrop might have been consciously preparing his journal to be read by others via handwritten copies.

Another example is poems by the poet Edward Taylor. One of the most famous poets of early New England, he was not very well known as a poet in his lifetime. Rather, his official position was pastor, pastor of Westfield. He prepared a careful manuscript copy of his poems in a leather-covered book that he titled "Poetical Works." He copied down all the poems from a collection he called "Preparatory Meditations" into this book. The poems were called

“Preparatory Meditations” since they helped him to prepare for preaching and giving communion. He also copied down other poems he wrote into “Poetical Works” (Hall, *Ways* 72). In this example Taylor seems to have exerted close control over the publication process, since he deliberately chose an organization for his poems, and put them all in one manuscript copy. How these poems were circulated and to whom is not very well known, but Taylor does seem to have prepared the manuscript carefully.

Finally, another example is people passing around writings to friends or mentors to ask for their approval or thoughts. Samuel Sewall passed around one of his writings discussing his interpretation of the end times to William Stoughton, for example (Hall, *Ways* 43). This demonstrates how people might engage in scribal publication with a limited audience in order to get initial opinions from people, especially from people whom they deem to have some expertise.

Now that we know some more about Puritan scribal publication, let’s think about its significance. We already touched on how scribal publication makes us think critically about what exactly publication is. But it also shows how there was publication that was less formal and more outside of the control of authorities in early New England. This might be because many times scribal publication arises out of *familial* and other relational networks. I just mentioned the example of John Winthrop’s son asking for his father to give him a copy of his sermon. Scribal publication seems to have been motivated by these relationships. An opposing publication model is that there is a specially-designated publisher, who selects things to be published based upon the needs of leaders in society. In this other model, the publisher might function as a representative and enforcer of larger purposes. They might represent the views of the majority or political leaders, for example. We might think of texts as having to pass through the publisher in order to be distributed. Scribal publication, however, would allow a whole variety of things to be “published” that stem from the decision of an individual with his/her own purposes rather than a formal publisher.¹ John Winthrop was able to publish a lot of things simply because he felt that they were important. Edward Taylor didn’t have to go through a literary agent; he might have thought of himself as a poet and decided to put together his own collection, *Poetical Works*, and publish it for posterity. Scribal publication seems to make publishing looser in some ways; it also makes it a little messier and out of control. For example, one of John Cotton’s letters was copied and passed around, eventually reaching places outside of New England. He said that it was “a private letter written to a friend,” but it somehow got passed around outside of his control (qtd in Hall, *Ways* 35). He said he never imagined that it could have gotten outside of New England. But it did—scribal publication made it a little easier for a letter to be published that went against the author’s wishes.

In this lecture I’ve presented the concept of scribal publication in Puritan New England. I have described what is meant by “scribal publication” as well as what this looks like. Some well-known Puritans including John Winthrop, the poet Edward Taylor, and the judge Samuel Sewall, all participated in this practice. Hopefully you have seen how scribal publication in Puritan New England might make us reexamine what we think of as “publication,” since it brings up questions of the roles of authors and readers and the public; and how it suggests an informal and independent way of publishing in early New England that was less able to be controlled. Please feel free to bring up questions and thoughts on this topic in the discussion forums. Please feel

¹ Not that publishers in New England only published texts that were permitted by societal authorities though—they also issued texts like “histories”, astrologies, or versions of Chaucer’s stories, which were not seen as favorably by authorities (Hall, *Worlds* Chap 1 part IV).

free to write your answers to the discussion questions in the course website and try out the group activity.

Discussion question 1: How does scribal publication change your view of what publication could be? Do you think it should be analyzed as its own discrete concept or practice? Why or why not? Can you think of any contemporary analogues of scribal publication (perhaps, grassroots publishing?) or other examples of it? How does the notion of scribal publication help us to understand what media and communications is?

Discussion question 2: Edward Taylor did not formally publish his poems in print, but he wrote them down in an organized way in manuscript form and seems to have left them for posterity. (His poems only came to more widespread attention when a scholar “found” them in the Yale library in the early 20th-century and drew attention to them). You can read a little about Taylor and his *Preparatory Meditations* poems here: <https://viva.pressbooks.pub/amlit1/chapter/author-introduction-edward-taylor-ca-1642-1729/> . To what extent do you think Taylor’s preparing a manuscript of his poems is considered publication? Scribal publication? What are ways in which this particular form of publication might have affected the reception and understanding of his poems?

Additional Reading and Works Cited

Amory, Hugh., and David D. Hall. *A History of the Book in America. Volume 1, The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*. Published in association with the American Antiquarian Society by the University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

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Hall, David D. *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England*. Knopf, 1989.