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Exploring Media Objects: *Magnalia Christi Americana*

Welcome to the lecture "Exploring Media Objects: *Magnalia Christi Americana*" in this course! What is a Puritan's favorite metaphor? While Puritans are not known for literary language, in this lecture I will explore a work that is filled with intricate metaphor to the point of being identified as poetry, in my opinion. We'll find that maybe Cotton Mather's favorite *kind* of metaphor was conceit. *Magnalia Christi Americana* is a work that might have been seen simply as a work of Baroque-style excess by critics, but actually, I suggest, might be examined for its literary facets. *Magnalia Christi Americana* was written by the minister Cotton Mather and first published in 1702. The *Magnalia* is seven volumes long. *Magnalia Christi Americana* very roughly means "great American works of Christ" in Latin. In this lecture I will explore facets of the *Magnalia,* focusing on those ways in which it differs from other Puritan texts of the time. I'll examine some of its metaphors in-depth and bring up the concept of the Puritan plain style. While the lecture touches on several points, the learning goals are for you to be able to describe what conceit is, how some examples from the *Magnalia* are conceits, and identify 1-2 ways *Magnalia* differs from other Puritan texts.

The full title is *Magnalia Christi Americana: or, the ecclesiastical history of New England from its first planting in the year 1620 unto the year of our LORD, 1698.* As you can see from the title, this book is what Mather describes as an "ecclesiastical history of New England"--basically, a history of the Christian church in New England. In the book he describes the arrival of Protestant English people to the Americas, specifically New England, their reasons for coming, and the growth of their churches and societies there. The book is split into seven volumes: the first book, "Antiquities," gives a large-scale overview of the settling of New England from the European exploration of the Americas to Mather's contemporary moment; the second book, "Containing the Lives of the Governours, and Names of the Magistrates of New England" describes the lives of government officials in New England; the third book, "Containing the Lives of Many Divines," describes additional people Mather considered prominent in New England; the fourth book, "An Account of the University," describes the founding of the school Harvard and prominent graduates or teachers at the school; the fifth book, "The Faith and order in the Churches of New England with Historical Remarks upon all those venerable assemblies," describes the beliefs of early New England churches; the sixth book, "A faithful Record of many illustrious, wonderful providences, both of mercies and judgments, on divers persons in New England" describes various supernatural occurrences and miracles in New England, also known as "providences"; the seventh book, "The Wars of the Lord," describes conflicts in early New England amongst the English and various Native tribes, such as King Philip's War.[1]

Let's just start with the very first words, the opening of the *Magnalia* to see what they can tell us. This is basically the first sentence, after the prefatory material written by some of Mather's colleagues, of the entire work. It is the first sentence of his "General Introduction" to the entire work. Mather writes,

> "I write the wonders of the Christian Religion, flying from the depravations of Europe, to the American strand: And, assisted by the Holy author of that religion, I do, with all conscience of truth, required therein by Him who is the truth itself, report the

[1] For an online version of the *Magnalia Christi Americana,* check out this Archive.org version: https://archive.org/details/magnaliachristia00math/page/n4/mode/1up

wonderful displays of His infinite power, wisdom, goodness…" (Mather 23 or first page of "A General Introduction").

Mather presents the subject matter as grand and dramatic. He's writing about English Protestants coming to New England, and he describes it as "the wonders of the Christian Religion, flying from the depravations of Europe, to the American strand." The historical context of the time is that the Protestant Reformation is being worked out in Europe. That is why Mather describes Protestants as the "Christian Religion, flying from the depravations of Europe." These depravations of Europe are religious depravations, ways in which churches have not followed the Bible in as authentic or direct of a way, according to the Puritans. The English Protestants—also known as "dissenters" because they disagreed with some mainstream views of the church—moved to America, to a place that came to be called New England. The Pilgrims, or Separatists moved to Plymouth, and the Puritans to Massachusetts Bay, what's now the Boston area. These Protestants are coming to this new land to preserve and to carry out their beliefs. They are going to the "American strand." Europe and America are contrasted as vastly different places, one somewhere old, decaying, and corrupted, and another, somewhere new and full of possibilities. Mather emphasizes his role as a recorder, a writer, and presenter. His first word is "I." It's not an introduction where he presents the topic at hand in a more impersonal way, as he might do with some of his sermons. Rather, it's an introduction where he describes his own perspective and organization of the material. The next several paragraphs of this introduction begin with "I," since he describes the parts that he will discuss in the text: "I relate the considerable matters that produced and attended the first settlement of the colonies…," "I first introduce the actors, that have… served those colonies…," "I add hereunto, the notables of the only Protestant university that…" and so forth. This style is a little more unusual for Mather, since many of his output consists of sermons and tracts that use a more impersonal, third-person voice. He does use the first-person "I" in some of his works, but it is not very often that these works contain an extensive breakdown of what he is going to do from the first-person voice. Mather also indicates whom he is helped by: the "Holy author of that [Christian] religion," presumably the Holy Spirit. Or God Himself. This assistant helps Mather to tell about the acts of the "power, wisdom, goodness" of God.

One thing that we might be able to tell from the beginning of the *Magnalia Christi Americana,* is that Mather seems to be positioning his book as a kind of epic. This idea is something that one scholar, Sacvan Bercovitch, has discussed (339-40). The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines epic as "A long narrative poem celebrating the great deeds of one or more legendary heroes, in a grand ceremonious style." The *Magnalia* is not a poem, though it does contain poems within it. While it doesn't fulfil this element of epic, it is at least in an epic style. It's quite long, at 7 volumes. And it does describe and praise a number of prominent ministers and magistrates of New England from the past and what they have done. The style is quite grand—we can see this from the description of the topic in the first sentence, but I will also show it in the extensive metaphor that Mather uses. For reference, let's compare the beginning of *Magnalia* with the beginning of another work that is fashioned as an epic, Milton's *Paradise Lost,* which was first published in 1667. Milton is sometimes called a Puritan, though how much he aligned himself with them is not extremely certain. He was a Protestant, but he did not become part of the clergy in the Church of England. The beginning is:

"Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,

With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing, Heavenly Muse, that, on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed
In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of Chaos…" (356).

This is another grand beginning. It introduces its weighty topic, "of Man's first disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree… sing heavenly muse…" The story of Adam and Eve's decision to eat the fruit in the garden is a critical Bible story for people in Milton's society. It tells about original sin. It's a story which creates a long problem for humanity which is eventually solved by "one greater Man" who "restore[s]" people, Christ. Milton asks a supernatural being to help him write, the "heavenly muse." Milton doesn't seem to emphasize his own position as a writer as much as Mather in this first part of *Paradise Lost.* This "heavenly muse" is actually likely the Holy Spirit, or God, too. This "muse" was at the top of "oreb," or "Sinai," which refer to Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai, places where Moses might have received the 10 commandments and heard from God ("The John Milton Reading Room" footnotes).

Now that we have seen a little of the style of *Magnalia,* we might see why it seems to be different from several other Puritan texts. There are not many Puritan texts that can be described as an attempt at an "epic." Although there are Puritan texts that claim to describe weighty theological subjects, , they are not always in a narrative form like epics are. The *Magnalia,* however, contains a lot of narration, as it narrates how English Protestants moved to the Americas, the lives of various prominent ministers, and the story of different "providences" or supernatural acts. Mather positions New England in a dramatic, spectacular way, starting a story that ironically goes against what we think of as the Puritan emphasis on modesty and sparseness in speech.

Let's continue with some of the ways in which *Magnalia Christi Americana* might be distinctive or different from other published Puritan texts. Let's look at its vivid, extensive metaphors. These metaphors often incorporate imagery or ideas from the Bible or classical sources, so they are also allusions. We're going to start with Mather's short introduction to part II of book IV, "An account of the University," which is about the history and impact of Harvard in New England. Part II, book IV, consists of some biographies describing graduates of the university. The introduction to part II is filled with metaphors. In the beginning of the introduction, Mather describes an "art" that Basil, probably an ancient writer,[2] wrote about (Mather Book IV, 140). He says that Basil describes how one method of attracting many doves is to collect some doves and put perfume on their wings. Then they are to be sent out so that when they come back, the perfume might attract other birds to come with them. Mather says that his own description of just a few graduates of Harvard might attract people to come to the Christian religion. He says that his writing about these few graduates is like sending out some doves from the house of Harvard. They have the perfume of a "good name" through his writing. He then says that he is not the first one to give this perfume to them—God is the one who has given them the perfume of His grace. Mather's application of perfume is made possible through an earlier application from God. He writes, "And yet I should not have bestow'd the ointment of their embalmed name, as I have done, if the God of Heaven by first bestowing the ointment of His heavenly grace upon them, had not given them to deserve it" (Mather Book IV, 140). Mather is

[2] This seems to be Basil of Caesarea or Basil the Great who was an early Christian.

using a concept from a classical source as a metaphor for some of the work that he is doing himself in his own writing. His metaphor is not just a way to describe the people he is writing about but a way to describe his writing itself. It's a slightly complex metaphor because it requires understanding this initial art that Basil describes around attracting doves. The overall impression is a kind of melding of Basil's writing with Mather's and a web of comparisons in which one is trying to pick apart what is metaphor and what is not. Selecting this imagery of doves to compare to the writing of Harvard graduates makes Mather appear almost as a magician or artist. Mather says the practice Basil describes is an art. It's a clever way of attracting doves, strangely manipulative and beautiful. The text doesn't say what someone does with the doves after they are done attracting them. The reader, perhaps unknowingly, is drawn into this metaphor as the doves are drawn back to the house, even as he/she reads it. The metaphor simultaneously complicates and simplifies, simultaneously reveals and hides.

This section then finishes with another extended metaphor. It's about scholars as trees. Mather says the people who played a role in bringing people over to New England and became the first leaders are like beech trees (Book IV, 140). They are also like cut-off trees because they died already. But then the people who graduate from Harvard and went on to be ministers are like cedars and fir trees. They are trees that have grown in the native soil from the beginning. These new trees seems like a bit of a progression from the beech trees, and they also indicate new growth and leadership in New England. Mather then mentions another historian, St. Jerome, who has used these trees as metaphors, ending with the Bible passage that that historian used. The passage is Isaiah 60:13: The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee [Israel], the fir-tree, and the pine-tree, to beautifie the place of my sanctuary." Mather does a few extra things here. First of all, he alludes to the historian St. Jerome. Apparently St. Jerome called Cyprian, Hilary, and other saints, cedars and fir-trees in his commentary on Isaiah 60:13. Mather is reusing Jerome's metaphor and his interpretation of the Bible, and in the process, implicitly comparing himself to Jerome as a writer and Christian thinker. In its original context Isaiah 60 seems to refer to a prophecy for the Israelites that God's glory will come to them and they will be renewed. The trees in Isaiah 60:13 indicate costly and high-quality woods, representing the glory of another country, that will come to decorate the Israelites' temple for God. Mather makes a triple metaphor in which Harvard alums are being compared to three things: to trees, to Cyprian and other saints, and to those foreign and costly trees that would purportedly enrich the Israelites.

In this short introduction which takes up just a third of the page in the *Magnalia*, two complex metaphors are already presented. These kinds of extensive metaphors appear regularly in other parts of book IV too. There normally is at least some kind of allusion-metaphor at the beginning of the biographies of each person in book IV. They also appear in other books such as book II, the lives of the governors and magistrates[3] .

Since these are so fun, let's look at an example of one more metaphor from book IV, this time about Samuel Mather. Cotton Mather says that Nathanael Mather published his brother Samuel's sermons after he died. Cotton Mather then describes how illuminating candles are created in order to reveal mysteries, which seems to be compared to Nathanael Mather revealing some of his brother's thought to the world through sermon publication. The metaphor is so extensive that it feels unwieldy, as we saw in the previous example. Mather writes, "Here, the waxen combs of the ancient and typical cells, being melted down is (as one expresses it) rolled up into shining tapers, to illuminate the students of those mysteries, in finding out the honey, that couches in the carcase of the slain lion of the tribe of Judah" (Mather Book IV, 152). He doesn't

[3] Example: book 2, page 8

seem to give more details about how exactly the honeycomb melting represents the sermon publication, but this seems to be the comparison—in the second part of the next sentence he says that Nathanael Mather brought "into the light" the "meditations" of his brother. Honeycombs are made into candles just as sermons are published. The honey in the lion refers to the answer to the riddle that Samson gave to the Philistine people in the book of Judges. Mather indicates that this lion is a metaphor within the Bible for the tribe of Judah since Judah is often paired with the image of the lion in the Bible. Mather's publication of his brother's sermons is like melting down honeycomb to turn into candles which help us to see a lion's body, thus showing the answer the Philistines sought from Samson.

These metaphor-allusions that I've just described are all quite extensive. Extended metaphors are often called "conceits." One literary dictionary defines conceit as "An ingenious and elaborate metaphor that makes an unconventional comparison" (Auger 57). Common examples are in John Donne's poetry and in Petrarch's. The examples I've described fit this definition—they compare Mather's descriptions of Harvard graduates to perfumed doves, founding Puritan leaders to beech trees with their tops lopped off, and graduates to cedar and fir trees. They are unconventional and elaborate; they also include allusion to classical and biblical texts. Another example of Puritan texts with conceit is Edward Taylor's poems. Taylor was a minister who lived in Westfield. One of his most famous poems is "Huswifery," which asks God to make himself like a spinning wheel for God. His soul is to be the spool of thread that God uses to make fine yarn. Conceit is not common with Puritan texts, but it is present in at least the *Magnalia* and Edward Taylor's poetry. Conceits, as I've mentioned before, seem to obfuscate and clarify at the same time—giving the reader a vivid image to hold in their minds but discussing this image in an intricate way. Mather's conceits further complicate matters because the images are borrowed from classical and biblical text, seeming to meld the ancient world and early New England in a surreal way.

So in *Magnalia* we have a text that conveys a dramatic narrative and uses extensive imagery, allusion, and conceit. It's unlike some other Puritan texts we've looked at and certainly unlike most Puritan sermons. Some scholars classify the work as "baroque"—though, I don't think that is sufficient for explaining why it is the way that it is (Warren 98). We might think of the whole work as a metaphor even, as an epic tale of early New England which is a retelling of stories from Ancient Greece or of Jews in the promised land. America is framed as a kind of starting point for a new era—somewhere free of the "depravations of Europe," so it easily gestures to several classical or Biblical stories.

What more could the *Magnalia* tell us about the Puritans? One thing to note is that the *Magnalia* doesn't follow the plain style. The plain style is the name commonly given to the Puritan style of writing and speaking. It is a style that avoids elaboration and ornament in order present material as directly as possible. The scholar Perry Miller writes describing this style "…the Puritan work[sermon] is mechanically and rigidly divided into sections and subheads and appears on the printed page more like a lawyer's brief than a work of art" (332). It is the reason for the uniform, systematic dissection of Bible passages and phrasing that sermons present. In my lecture about Ramus, I show the origins of this kind of logical structure. Imagery and extensive rhetorical effects were seen as detracting from the point of the sermon itself. The plain style avoided metaphors, imagery, and wordplay. The *Magnalia* stands in strong contrast to plain style writings. There are metaphors which sometimes seem to hide meaning as much as present it. There is narrative, human stories, which do not clinically break down an idea into its parts. Rather, they tell a tale of grand beginnings that seem to refer to a bygone age. The *Magnalia*

sticks out a bit and shows us that Puritan writing cannot be reduced to or encompassed by the plain style.

Now, what do you think about the *Magnalia*? What intrigues you about it, or what do you wish you knew more about? What kind of medium is best for conveying an epic story? How would you narrate the story of early New England? I look forward to reading your thoughts and discussions. Happy writing!

Discussion question 1: Consider again this passage from *Magnalia* about the doves (quoted below). Why is this a conceit, and more importantly, what do YOU find interesting about this passage? What strikes you and what features of Mather's language are you interested in? Note: you can find a copy of Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* here: https://archive.org/details/magnaliachristia00math/page/140/mode/1up?view=theater

"The Great Basil mentions a Certain Art, of Drawing many Doves, by anointing the Wings of a Few with a Fragrant Ointment, and so sending them abroad that by the Fragrancy of the Ointment they may allure others unto the House, whereof they are themselves the Domesticks. I know not how far it may have any Tendency to draw others unto the Religion hitherto professed and maintained in Harvard-Colledge: But I have here sent forth some of the Doves belonging to that House, with the Ointment of a Good Name upon them. And yet I should not have bestow'd the Ointment of their Embalmed Name, as I have done, if the God of Heaven by first bestowing the Ointment of His Heavenly Grace upon them, had not given them to deserve it…" (Mather Book IV, 140).

Discussion question 2: How is the *Magnalia* different from other Puritan texts? (you could compare it with the *Bay Psalm Book*, a sermon, or any other text you know about, or just base our answer on the material from the lecture). And, speculate or reason about WHY you think it is different. Why would Cotton Mather want to write in this way?

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