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Exploring Media Objects: The *Bay Psalm Book*

Welcome to the lecture “Exploring Media Objects: The *Bay Psalm Book*” in this course! Do you know what was the first book printed in the English colonies in America? It is the *Bay Psalm Book*! This is the media that we will focus on discussing today. The *Bay Psalm Book* is a collection of Psalms that are put into metered lines of poetry. That means that the Psalms are written in lines with set numbers of syllables in a regular pattern. The book was used by congregants in church to sing Psalms during church services. *The Bay Psalm Book* makes us question some of our assumptions about what a book could be, including that books are normally written by one author, that they are read by people individually, and that they are used for silent activities. In this lecture I’ll describe the *Bay Psalm Book* and what the songs inside were like. Then I’ll discuss how this book tells us about how the Puritans used communications media. The learning goals are for you to be able to discuss how the *Bay Psalm Book* engaged with the media of music, singing, speech, and writing.

Let’s start with how the *Bay Psalm Book* came to be printed. First, the *Bay Psalm Book* wasn’t printed with the title of “Bay Psalm Book.” The official title of the book was *The Whole Booke of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Meter*. It’s further described on the title page, *Whereunto is prefixed a discourse declaring not only the lawfullnes, but also the necessity of the heavenly ordinance of singing scripture psalms in the churches of God*. We call the book the Bay Psalm Book to distinguish it from other Psalm books for singing—it was the Bay Psalm Book because it was written by the English in Massachusetts Bay. The first copies of the *Bay Psalm Book* were printed in 1640 by Stephen Daye. The printing press on which it had been printed, the first printing press in New England, had been bought by Joseph Glover of Surrey, England. Stephen Daye was originally Glover’s apprentice. However, Glover died before the press was brought to New England. With the help of Elizabeth Glover, Joseph Glover’s wife, either Stephen Daye or Stephen Daye’s son gradually took charge of the press (Winship 11-14). One interesting historical tidbit is that the Bay Psalm Book actually wasn’t the first printing job that the press was given. Its first job was to print an oath that was required for some English people coming over to America to take, the Freeman’s Oath (Winship 19). The press previously printed the oath as well as an almanac in 1639 (Winship 18-21). What makes the *Bay Psalm Book* special is that it is the first surviving work that the press printed. It is also the first thing the press printed that might be called a “book,” since it’s a bound-together set of pages of text. The press printed about 1,700 copies of the book at first (Winship 22).

Even just from knowing this information about the printing, there are already some tensions that we might be able to detect. What kind of a “book” is the *Bay Psalm Book*, really? It’s famous for being the first surviving book printed in the English settlements in America but ironically it doesn’t seem like a very standard book. It functioned as an aide to congregants singing in church. It essentially was a copy of the lyrics for the songs that the congregants would sing together during the service. It wasn’t exactly used in a silent-reading front-cover-to-back-cover way. It was really a collection of texts that were used for the implementation of group singing, something most books don’t do. An additional tension is that this book doesn’t seem to have a single author, as we might expect books to have. The Psalms in the Bible were written by Israelites in the time of the Old Testament, including King David, Asaph, the sons of Korah, and others. The Bible was believed to be the words of God, so God can also be said to be the author of the Psalms. The *Bay Psalm Book* doesn’t copy the Biblical Psalms directly but rather offer the

Puritans' own version of the Psalms for their musical and church purposes. Some of the main ministers who were said to have developed this version of the Psalms were Richard Mather, Thomas Welde, and John Eliot (Eames xi). They composed their version by attempting to maintain the original meaning and sense of the text while putting it into lines of verse that sounded more regular and rhythmic. The *Bay Psalm Book* seems to be a multiauthor, collaborative work that involves people across the ages.

As you keep these tensions about the *Bay Psalm Book* as a book in your mind, let's investigate the poetic style of the versions of the Psalms in the book. The *Bay Psalm Book* was part of a longer Reformation tradition of using metered Psalms for singing. There were other Psalm books that Protestant congregations used. Before the Bay Psalm book, the Puritans probably used either an edition of the Psalms by the pastor Henry Ainsworth or by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins (Hood 11-13; Scholes, *The Puritans and Music* 259). This latter version was known as the "Sternhold and Hopkins" version and was printed in the backs of some Bibles at that time (Scholes, *The Puritans and Music* 255). In order to examine the *Bay Psalm Book* we will compare it with these other versions. Let's compare Psalm 23 across the three versions. Psalm 23 is one of the most famous Psalms in the Bible and presents God as a shepherd. We will just look at the first 1-2 stanzas in the Psalm books, which corresponds to roughly 3 verses of the Psalm.

First, the version of the Psalms in the Bible is: "<sup>1</sup>The Lord *is* my shepherd, I shall not want.<sup>2</sup> He maketh me to rest in green pasture, *and* leadeth me by the still waters. <sup>3</sup>He restoreth my soul, *and* leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake" ("Psalm 23"). This is from the 1599 Geneva Bible, a version the Puritans likely would have used (Gribben 3). Now I will read the Ainsworth, Sternhold and Hopkins, and Bay Psalm book versions of the beginning of Psalm 23.

The Ainsworth version is:

Jehovah feedeth me, I shal not lack;  
In grassy folds He down doth make me lye;  
He gently-leads me quiet waters by.  
He doth return my soul; for His name sake  
In paths of justice leads me quietly (qtd in Scholes, *The Puritans and Music* 258)

The Sternhold and Hopkins version (by W.W.) is:

The Lord is onely my support,  
And he that doth me feede:  
How can I then lacke any thing:  
Whereof I stand in neede.  
He doth me folde in coates most safe,  
The tender grasse fast by:  
And after drives me to the Streames,  
Which runne most pleasantly (Sternhold and Hopkins 13)

The *Bay Psalm Book* version is:

The Lord to mee a shepherd is,  
Want therefore shall not I:  
He in the folds of tender grass,

Doth cause me down to lie:  
To waters calme me gently leads  
Restore my soule doth hee:  
He doth in paths of rightesousness:  
For his names sake leade mee (*Digital Bay Psalm 79-80*).

As you can see, these versions of the Psalms involve reworking the original Bible verse and organizing it into lines with some regularized rhythm. We will compare and analyze the three versions, but let's focus on the Bay Psalm version first. I will read it again [read it again]. This version has alternating lines of 8 syllables and 6 syllables. If we listen to the lines we can hear that the syllables tend to come together in groups of two, a common pattern. Poetry scholars call these pairs iambs. The second syllable is emphasized a little more. I will read this again where I emphasize the second syllables a little more. You can try counting how many syllables OR syllables-pairs there are. [read again with emphasizing]. Compare this first line, "The Lord to mee a shepherd is" with the original text of the Bible: "The Lord is my shepherd." The metrical version has a regularity with the sounds. You wouldn't read the Bible version line, "The LORD is MY she-PHERD." But you can read the other line, "The LORD to MEE a SHE-pherd IS." (you still wouldn't read it quite like that, but there's a little more tendency to stress the second syllable).

The Bay Psalm version, compared to the others, seems to keep the imagery of the shepherd. The Sternhold and Hopkins version doesn't use this imagery at all. It seems to replace the imagery of the shepherd with the concept, "support," as in the first line, "The Lord is onely my support." Neither does the Ainsworth version retain the imagery of the shepherd. The Ainsworth and Sternhold and Hopkins do keep some of the other images, though, including the grass and the water. The Ainsworth seems particularly close to the original, retaining some of the original syntax—"I shall not lack," for "I shall not want," and "He gently-leads me quiet waters by" for "leadeth me by the still waters." The *Bay Psalm* version keeps the wording of the original with slightly different syntax. For example, "Want therefore shall not I" for "I shall not want." You can count yourselves later, but I will tell you now that the Ainsworth Psalm 23 is in lines of 5 iambs—which is 10 syllables—throughout the poem, and the Sternhold and Hopkins is in patterns of 4 and 3 iambs—8 and 6 syllables—throughout the poem, like the *Bay Psalm* version. The three versions all have this regular, iambic meter and the Ainsworth version seems to have the most uniform and regular meter of all. The other two have slight variation of meter. Finally, the *Bay Psalm* version seems to preserve the original imagery and wording of the psalm most while being uniquely its own poem, with its own syntax/phrasing and some consistent rhythmic patterns throughout the poem. I would suggest that the *Bay Psalm Book* plays it safe by sticking to the original, but subtly putting its own spin on things. It preserves the original's ideas and images but thoroughly maintains the requirements of the rhythm it has set up for itself. Perhaps this book was printed in order to present a new, distinctive New England Puritan take on singing the Psalms.

How does the *Bay Psalm Book* engage with music that Puritans made? The preface of the Bay Psalm book states that there were 6 kinds of psalms, presumably distinguished by meter and structure for musical arrangement. The Psalms were divided into categories that matched different melodies. Psalms in one category matched almost forty tunes. Psalms in another category could be sung in three tunes (Haraszti 66). The Psalms were basically sung with one melody and not harmonies. There was not a lot of melodies and harmonies woven together. The

Puritans did not emphasize using instruments like the organ. One Puritan writes of instrumental accompaniment as an “externall solemnitie” (John Cotton qtd in Scholes, *The Puritans and Music* 246). While it doesn’t seem as if the Puritans valued musical development, scholars have some contrasting views on this matter. One scholar summarizes a viewpoint that “Calvinism acted as a depressant on music” (Covey 378). However, other scholars have attempted to show how the Puritans were attentive to music in different ways. The Puritans seemed to have drastically simplified musical traditions during church services. There was barely any instrumentation. And people would mostly sing psalms because they thought it was biblical to do so. They cited some Bible verses for this particular practice: Ephesians 5:18 which instructs people to “...be filled with the Spirit,<sup>19</sup> speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord...” and Colossians 3:16, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.” These verses affirmed for the Puritans that singing is a part of the Christian life; singing psalms were important because Israelites in the Old Testament did so (*Digital Bay Psalm* 2-4). Overall, it seems that the New England Puritans paid attention to music during their services, even if they started a new kind of tradition. Music was not something that they neglected and they understood that it had a certain significance. Actually, the *a capella* voices and the simplicity of the melody could have had an unusually intense effect during the service. People might listen to each other more when there were less moving parts.

Now that we’ve discussed several aspects of the *Bay Psalm Book*, let’s finish by discussing how these come together. We talked about how the *Bay Psalm Book* puts into question the definition of a “book,” including the idea of an author, of a single creator since the psalm song lyrics inside were developed by multiple people. We also discussed the *Bay Psalm Book* as consisting of specially constructed poems that give attention to sound. And finally we discussed how the *Bay Psalm Book* allows the Puritans to create their own distinctive kind of music. The *Bay Psalm Book* brings together many different media—singing, music, print, writing. It also involves “speech”: the Bible verses about singing Psalms also state that Christians are to “speak” psalms and songs and use these songs to “admonish” and “teach,” both actions that are usually done by speaking. These different modes of communications—singing, speaking, print, and writing-- work together to allow for congregants’ singing of Psalms. They overlap, and indeed, it can become hard to distinguish them from each other. Is the *Bay Psalm Book* a song? It might not seem as if it is, but without it, singing during services would be impossible, so it assists with the medium of singing. Scholars have also described the links between song, speech, and poetry, especially as if the overflow of speech were music or poetry. TS Eliot in “The Music of Poetry” writes that a poem could be musical in that it both “has a musical pattern of sound” and “a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it” (113). That means a poem has music patterns of sound but also music patterns of meaning. Marshall McLuhan writes, “In one respect poetry approaches song in slowing down ordinary speech” (74). Poetry and song both seem to bring out some of the most significant parts of speech, allowing us to hear it more clearly. *The Bay Psalm Book* highlights how the media of music, poetry, speech, and print often include or rely upon each other.

I’ve discussed the *Bay Psalm Book* from different angles, and now it’s your turn to share your thoughts! What do you think about the *Bay Psalm Book* and what kind of a book is it?

Discussion question 1: What books have you used to aid you in singing? Did they function differently from other books you have read? Compare how the book(s) you have used functioned with how the *Bay Psalm Book* functioned, taking into account factors such as the presence of poetry, the presence of speaking, and how the medium of a printed book affects the medium of sound or singing.

Discussion question 2: Discuss the role of poetry in the use of the *Bay Psalm Book*. How would the book be different if it did not have poetry, and only had prose? Do you think poetry is particularly suited for the medium of a book, the medium of sound, or music/singing? Do you think it is well-suited for various electronic/digital media including webpages, smartphones, kindles, or others? Remember to give examples!

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