

Genre and Puritan Diaries: Multiplication and Mixing

Welcome to “Genre and Puritan Diaries: Multiplication and Mixing”! Has a friend or someone you know asked the question, “what is your favorite genre of literature” or a similar question? Maybe you said you enjoy the suspense of mystery novels; the personal detail of autobiographies; or the practical nature of how-to books. In answering this question, you are responding to the idea of “genre.” The concept of genre is one we will explore in this lecture today. Normally by “genre” we mean a classification. For example, we can classify a book as a “mystery novel” if it has certain characteristics, including detectives, unsolved crime cases, a puzzle presented at the beginning which is resolved at the end, and clues or hints for the reader to solve this puzzle. But is it really that simple? What if there is a mystery novel that has all of these characteristics except for one? How exactly do we define what constitutes a certain “genre”? In this lecture I will provide a definition of what genre is and then describe the genre of Puritan diaries and how they might help us to understand the concept of genre more. The learning goals are for you to be able to explain Carolyn Miller’s definition of genre and describe one characteristic of Puritan diaries. Join in on the conversation after the lecture in the discussion forums on the course website!

First, let’s look at some definitions of genre. Critics have debated how exactly to define genre and its role in literary scholarship. For example, one famous critic named Northrop Frye theorizes just four main genres in literature: comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire. Though his theories are quite well-known, in this lecture we’ll focus on the ideas of Carolyn Miller, a professor of Rhetoric and Technical Communication at NC State University. Miller’s definition centers on a genre’s development through rhetorical practice. Rhetorical practice is the actual, real-life ways in which someone understands the things that others say. I want to emphasize “actual, real-life.” It’s not about understanding what people say through scholars’ theories or abstract literary patterns. It’s about how real people or real societies commonly understand something in their everyday lives. Miller considers genres such as “the user manual” or the recommendation letter (155). These may seem trivial but they are genres grounded in rhetorical practice. They are legitimate genres that tell us something about how people actually use and enact language in real-life. Miller’s definition also focuses on rhetorical action. Rhetorical action is about the real-life outcomes and impacts that words lead to. Genre becomes a question of pragmatics: the real-life results that are accomplished (Miller 152).

Rhetorical action entails, however, a discussion of how to define “action,” which is another section of Miller’s argument. In order to define “action” one must also define the terms “situation” and “motive,” according to Miller (152). This is where Miller hones in on the concept of exigence—basically “social motive” (158). “Social motive” or exigence is the force that propels the creation of a genre. For example, the exigence for the genre of the recommendation letter would be different institutions, like a company or school, requiring recommendation letters in order to evaluate their candidates. These institutions’ procedures have developed a societal or shared need for certain kinds of documents. They form a motive that propels the genre of the recommendation letter.

Here is Miller’s definition of genre in her own words: “Genre refers to a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of rhetorical action; as action, it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose” (163). Notice her decision to use the word “conventional.” That means she thinks of genre as arising from conventions, from practices that no one person starts but that have become widespread in society.

Genre has to do with all of society, with a group of people rather than individuals: hence, “large-scale typification.”

Let’s look at some other definitions of genre now as well as inspect Miller’s definition for its strengths and weaknesses. Some other definitions focus more on form, on the structural or organizational qualities of a text. Miller’s definition discusses how form is a part of genre, too, and how it is connected to rhetorical action, but her definition does not focus on form as the main defining feature of genre. One example of form defining a specific genre is the genre of the sonnet, commonly defined as a 14 line poem, usually with a similar amount of syllables in each line, and with some patterns of rhyming. Genre is also commonly defined by its content. Miller’s definition doesn’t seem to focus as much on definition by content, either. For example, the Gothic genre is often defined according to elements in the story such as supernatural or uncanny happenings and strange, foreign places. Finally, another competing perspective on genre is from a scholar named Ralph Cohen. He first shows that the definition of genre and what genres are present in society appear to have changed through time so that “genre” is a flexible concept. He then argues that this feature is exactly what makes the concept of genre useful. Whichever the commonly accepted genres are in a particular point in time becomes a reflection of different attitudes and ideas within society in that time. So Miller’s idea, then, deemphasizes some of these aspects I’ve brought up: the distinguishing role of form or structure; the content of a text; and the fact that genre can inversely be a means to understand the attitudes of a society.

Next: Let’s consider Puritan diaries. What can they tell us about genre? They present an interesting conundrum: Puritan diaries, in both old and New England, are often conglomerates of various genres. They contain various lists, meditations, poems, and other items. Cotton Mather’s diary is one example. His diary includes more typical regularly-written diary entries that narrate his day, but also memoir-like passages covering swaths of time, hymn compositions, lists of resolutions and rules, quotations, and lists from past diaries. In his entry for September 1685, he starts off discussing what happened that day but then starts enumerating several plans that he has. He writes at the beginning of the entry, “There is a young gentleman, Mr. Daniel Royse, for whose everlasting happiness, I have used many Endeavours. But unto all the rest, I now added this. / I prevailed with him, to bee with mee, all the Day in my study; and I spent the day, in prayer with fasting, for his eternal welfare...” (Mather I:104). After discussing Royse he moves on to discussing some of the conflict in England briefly and records a vow that he makes: “That whenever I received certain Tidings, of the Lord’s appearing to scatter our Foes and our Fears I will...keep a Day of Thanksgiving unto Him...” (I: 105). He then enumerates 6 plans, or “designs” that he had in the past few months. He lists them out using Roman numerals. The first is, “Whenever I pray with any sick person, I would bee at pains to do what good I can, upon the Souls of them, that attend in the Room, where I give the Visit” (I: 105). The second is, “I would on the Lord’s Day Mornings, have my rising thoughts often employed on this question, *What service may I do for the Lord Jesus Christ, as I am a Pastor to a Flock of His?*” (I: 105). In just this one diary entry, besides some of the more standard summary of what went on that day, there is also a record of a vow that he has made, and a listing out of his previous plans.

In another part of his diary, he writes a hymn since he feels that singing is the best way to thank God for several things in his life. The beginning of this hymn is: “Health, Bread, with Life, my God mee sends, / My consort, Father, Friends; / Employment, with Free Speech and Fame, / And Books to feed the Same. / For This, but most, for thy dear Son, / My Thanks are now begun...” (I: 154). He then revises, or as he says, “mend[s]” this hymn and writes the revision immediately after the first one. The revision seems rather extensive; basically none of the

original lines are preserved, and a third stanza is added, but the theme is still thanksgiving to God. Another genre in his diary is that at the end of most of the years of his life Mather lists the sermons that he has preached. He threads together the sermon topics and Bible passages for those sermons in a loose narrative. For example, "I preached also four sermons on Jam. [James] 2.23. Friendship with God. A sermon, on Joh. 12. 26, at the death of Mr. Shepard. Two sermons on Job. 6.44, The drawings of the Father" (I: 119-120). This excerpt is from his entry for the end of 1685.

In about 1710 which is the later part of his life he starts up something called a "Good Devised" ("GD's). These are his plans for doing something positive and helpful regularly. He makes lists of "G.D.s" throughout his diary. The "Good Devised"s seems to have evolved from earlier practices in which he listed actions he wanted to complete or things to thank God for. The GDs are numbered and tend to be in groups of 7, one for each day of the week. One example of a GD is from February 24, 1716, in which he writes, "I would examine my petitions unto God; and see to it, that God and not Self, be the chief end wherein they terminate" (II: 438).

One scholar of English diaries, Andrew Cambers, discusses the presence of multiple genres of writing within English or New England diaries, like Cotton Mather's. He says: "Both diaries and autobiographies frequently included other material—prayers, sermon notes, history, poetry, meditations, lists of providences, and so on—that demonstrate the error in calling the books in which they were contained simply diaries or autobiographies" (Cambers 802). For Cambers, it might not even be accurate to call some of the Puritan diaries, "diaries," because they contain several genres within them. Let's make a note of something at this moment: so far, we've been applying the term "genre" to Puritan diaries a little loosely, without stringently applying Miller's definition. Yet it may be that the Puritan diary is suggesting something different about genre from Miller. Let's see what happens if we use the Puritan diary to help us examine Miller's definition more.

So first, one tentative conclusion we might make from looking at Puritan diaries like Cotton Mather's is that genre may not be something based on social motive as Carolyn Miller would suggest, but rather on a personal sense of aesthetics. Puritans included lots of different genres in their diaries. There was a desire to use different forms, to weave together different formats. Their diaries might point to how genre can "escape" social purpose and be developed based on one's own sense of aesthetics and creativity. They juxtaposed different genres together, like hymns, lists of planned actions, the commonplace book, and autobiography. For example, Mather seems to merge the commonplace genre with a kind of regular, yearly personal reflection on his life. The commonplace book is a genre in which people write down quotations from books, plays, poems, or other works, that strike them. Mather writes down quotations from a variety of sources, at the beginning of the entries for every year of his life; they seem to encapsulate what he hopes are themes for his life that year. He's drawing on the commonplace tradition and merging it with typical diary entries.

Mather's diary brings up the question of the role of motive, of some kind of real-world situation that propels the existence of a specific genre. He includes genres that don't immediately result from some kind of social motive. Perhaps genre does not always arise from a real-life social motive, or even if it does arise from that, does not continue to manifest only because of that motive. For example, Mather seems to write down hymns not entirely for the purpose of singing, but more so he can use a form or structure that he enjoys exploring and working with. He writes down many "Good Devised"s but because of their quantity and regularity Mather seems to become more interested in this particular form itself, than their underlying purpose,

which is to actually practice them. He seems particularly interested in building on and developing this particular genre. Again, Miller says that genre has to do with a set of conventions that evolves from a particular social context, but Mather's diary seems to indicate that one person can develop their own genre in a rigorous and consistent way.

In this lecture I have discussed some definitions of genre and how we could use it to investigate Puritan diaries. I focused on Carolyn Miller's influential definition of genre as formed from social conventions, as a rhetorical action propelled by a shared societal motive. I then brought up how Puritan diaries seem to have a plethora of different genres. But their mixture and multiplication of genres might reveal to us how a genre might exist and function outside of a social motive. These diaries further show us how the Puritans were interested in genre and in a variety of distinctive structures of writing. In the discussion sections, I hope that you can expand on Miller's definition of genre and use it to analyze some media today. Choose one or more discussion questions to respond to and share your thoughts in the course discussion forums!

Discussion question 1: How might reading something on a smartphone alter a genre, if it does at all? For example, does reading a mystery novel on one's phone alter the genre of the mystery novel? Discuss the relationship between genre and media.

Discussion question 2: Choose a genre. Examine how it might align with Miller's thesis. What is the social motive underlying this genre? Why does the form fit the social motive? Are there examples of this genre being used in a way that doesn't fit the common social motive?

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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