

Puritan Love of Logic: The Impact of Petrus Ramus

Welcome to the lecture “Puritan Love of Logic: The Impact of Petrus Ramus” in this course! If you’ve looked at a lot of New England Puritan sermons you’ll find that they have a similar kind of organization, and you might think, “Why did the Puritans have to be so systematic and logical all the time?” Essentially, Puritan sermons are always divided into main points and subpoints. There’s always an overall main point for the entire sermon, and this point is carefully divided into subpoints and subsubpoints. The outline or skeleton of a sermon becomes excruciatingly clear. This kind of format is called the “doctrine-use format.” In the doctrine-use format the doctrine, or main point of the sermon, comes first. Then come a series of subpoints which are divided into further subpoints. This is followed by an end section that presents several applications of the doctrine. At the very beginning of the sermon is a Bible verse, from which the doctrine originates, or which it provides a generalized interpretation of. Not just sermons have some of these elements, but other Puritans writings do, too.¹ You can try it out yourself—check out the Evans Early American Imprint Collection online and search for different sermons from the 17th-century. Almost all of them will have this extremely clear and organized structure. In this lecture, you will learn about why the features of the “doctrine-use” sermon is so prominent amongst the Puritans. It has to do with someone named Petrus Ramus. I’ll explain who Ramus was and some of his ideas, then show his influence on the Puritans. The learning goals are for you to be able to identify 1-2 ways in which Ramus impacted the Puritans. Much of the information that I am presenting is sourced from Walter Ong’s in-depth discussion of Ramus in *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*.

First, a little biographical sketch of Ramus: Ramus was born around 1515 in Cuts, France. He studied at the University of Paris and he eventually became a professor at the University of Paris in 1551. He became known for some of his seemingly anti-Aristotelian ideas and instituted alternatives in logic that would become highly influential, including for the Puritans. Ramus himself was born a Catholic but converted to Protestantism—which is to say, he became a Huguenot, a word for a French Protestant at the time. He and his friend and colleague, Omar Talon, each published works that engaged in similar ideas. Ramus was eventually killed, at around 57 years of age, in the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in France in August 1572 (Ong 18-29). St. Bartholomew’s Massacre involved the killing of many French Protestants. Ramus was regarded as a martyr for his faith by many Protestants (Sellberg).

Ramus discussed dialectic intensively. A term familiar amongst scholars in Ramus’ day, dialectic is basically a way of speaking and of discerning logical answers to different questions. For example, one can use dialectic to dissect and respond to a question like “Is man an animal?” That would involve defining what an animal is and seeing if this definition applies to the set of all men. Ramus had defined dialectic as “the ability to discourse” or the “power of discoursing” (Ong 176). For Ramus, dialectic was the “queen” of subjects, the most important of various disciplines (Ong 182). Ramus wrote a few books about dialectic, including a textbook named *Dialectique* and a textbook, *Dialecticae institutiones*.

One way to understand Ramus’ impact on the Puritans and his impact as a whole is to understand how he thought about the relationship between the art of dialectic and natural dialectic. This is also an angle that Walter Ong focuses on in his book, and something that led to this lecture. Ramus saw the art of dialectic as imitating natural dialectic. This sounds simple

¹ Some essays will have a “doctrine” even if the essay is not explicitly presented as a sermon. See “Agathangelus” in Cotton Mather’s *Coelestinus* for an example.

enough, but actually has huge ramifications. Let's take a step back. What IS the art of dialectic, and what is natural dialectic? The art of dialectic is similar to dialectic. It is just the collection of principles and guidelines that make up dialectic and can be used to do it well. What about natural dialectic? It's like dialectic too but in a kind of original form. It is what some people intrinsically have if they already have a sense of logic and can discourse and reason well. "Natural dialectic," according to Ramus, also consists of what some older classical writers such as Cicero have said. These classical figures speak and discourse in such a way that people learning the "art of dialectic" should imitate them. Ramus also refers to other arts as having a "natural" counterpart, like "natural physics," "natural mathematics," and "natural moral philosophy." The "natural" version is a kind of original or underlying version that doesn't require any additional teaching or synthesis of principles and rules. Ramus also notes that natural dialectic allows for dialectic to be used continually, since it is more inbuilt (Ong 177).

Now let's look at how the art of dialectic and natural dialectic are related, according to Ramus. Ramus seemed to think that the art of dialectic traces natural dialectic rather precisely. The art of dialectic was not really an intermediary on the way to understanding natural dialectic but was supposed to be a kind of copy of what natural dialectic was. Ramus, in his work *The Training of Dialectic*, used the metaphor of the artist Apelles painting a portrait of Alexander the Great to show the connection (Ong 177).² Ramus says that Apelles' painting of Alexander the Great is like the art of dialectic and that Alexander himself is like natural dialectic. That is, the art of dialectic is like a painting or a copy of natural dialectic. It is related to natural dialectic in the way that the portrait of Alexander the Great is related to himself. We might not think that such a close correspondence between natural dialectic and the art of dialectic exists, but according to Ramus, it is such a close correspondence. This metaphor furthermore involves a visual representation. For Ong, the art of dialectic is like a kind of visual representation of natural dialectic. Finally, it's not just one statement in the art of dialectic that imitates natural dialectic, but the whole art itself becomes one representation of natural dialectic (Ong 177).

It'll help to understand Ramus' thoughts about the relation between the art of dialectic and natural dialectic to contrast it with something else. Essentially, this relationship wasn't always quite as straightforward. Rather, the art of dialectic used to be conceived of as something much more dynamic than just a portrait, a still visual copy. The art of dialectic previous to Ramus could be thought of as a system with its own kind of rules, with multiple, diversified parts. It was not seen as a mere copy, but as something in itself entirely, as its own kind of system to grapple with, immerse oneself in, and contend with.

Notably, Ramus' model of dialectic contrasted with Aristotle's. Ramus is famously known for criticizing Aristotle avidly and even was controversial in his time for it. Though, Ramus himself said he was not criticizing Aristotle, but criticizing how scholars after Aristotle presented his ideas. Ramus' system of logic and dialectic emphasized a central term, "argument," which was not divided into a complex series of parts as in Aristotelianism (Miller 122; 124). Rather, it could be mapped out rather neatly through a series of binaries. By contrast, the Aristotelian system consisted of elaborate divisions and a large number of specific terms (Miller 122). For example, Aristotelian logic emphasized several types of predicables; a predicable is a term in Aristotelian logic which is anything that could be said about a subject. There were several kinds of predicables including: *genus*, *species*, *differentia*, *proprium*, and *accidens*

² The Greek artist Apelles apparently painted portraits of Alexander the Great, although none of Apelles' work survives today.

(Reid). Ramus did not focus on the necessity of remembering and applying all of these parts and terms in his system.

Ramus' focus on the art of dialectic as a copy of natural dialectic gave rise to visual mapping diagrams that he is known for and which are found across his own and his followers' works. Ramus often conceptualizes arts as maps that are able to express their "natural" counterparts. The art represents nature directly, through geometric, visual, somewhat mathematical means. These maps present a core part of the discipline and then split it into two to present two aspects of it, and those are further split up (Ong 181; 199-202). This binary structure leads to the distinct "branched" style of many Puritan sermons in which a main doctrine is presented that is then split into parts, each of which is then branched out again to be proven.³ This feature is called "Ramist branching." "Ramist branching" may happen in Puritan sermons because sermons are a kind of attempt to precisely map a given statement and show its logic. The sermon might be said to correspond closely to reality in this precise, visual way.

How else do we know that Ramus impacted Puritan thinking? Several scholars have identified this connection. One prominent scholar, Perry Miller, writes that "while Augustine and Calvin have been widely recognized as the sources of Puritanism, upon New England Puritans the logic of Petrus Ramus exerted fully as great an influence as did either of the theologians" (Miller 116). Ramus' ideas were controversial but many Puritans in England as well as those in New England, became interested in them (Miller 117-8). In New England, Cotton Mather had written that at some point the Ramist method was favored over the Aristotelean at Harvard (Miller 118).

In this lecture I've presented who Petrus Ramus was and his ideas, specifically about the relationship between the art of dialectic and natural dialectic. I've shown some of his impact and influence, ultimately on Puritans' sermons and thinking. Now it's your turn! What do you make of the Ramist influence? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of Ramist and Aristotelian thinking? I look forward to reading your answers in the discussion forums.

Discussion question 1: Look at Increase Mather's *The Day of Trouble is Near* (<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N00137.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>). (Or, choose any New England Puritan sermon you are interested in, for example Urian Oakes' *New England Pleaded With*; Samuel Danforth's *A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness* or William Stoughton's *New England's True Interest, Not to Lie* --you can find many sermons in the Evans Early Imprint Collection, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/>). See if you can identify the doctrine or doctrines within it and the starting Bible verse, typically of the doctrine-use/Ramist format. Skim the sermon in order to make an outline of it. What do you make of its structure? How does it reflect Ramist ideas or influence?

Discussion question 2: Given what you know about the Puritans already, how do you think an interest in Ramus aligns with or contrasts with Puritan tendencies or thinking?

(Bonus discussion question 3: Read the following imagined description from Miller of how Ramus felt upon encountering Aristotelian thinking. Then, consider how his idea of the relation between the art of dialectic and natural dialectic might have arisen from this experience.

³ See Meredith Neuman, *Jeremiah's Scribes*, pg 14; Kneidel, Gregory. "Ars Praedicandi: Theories and Practice"

“Such was the logic [Aristotelian] taught at Paris when the penniless Pierre de Ramée came up from Picardy, consumed with a desire for useful knowledge...Their logic had neither rhyme nor reason, even from the very first lessons in which they confronted the student with a series of abstruse and disconnected terms and required him to memorize them. No reason for these terms was ever offered, no philosophical justification for their number or arrangement, and so the student never suspected that a rationale for the structure of logic could possibly exist. He was given a miscellaneous aggregation of disparate concepts...” (Miller 123.)

Additional Reading and Works Cited

Evans Early American Imprints Collection Series I, 1639-1800 (for looking at early New England and other texts; digitized through the Text Creation Partnership, Readex, and the American Antiquarian Society (AAS)): <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/>

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