

## Putting it to Memory: Speech and Memorization in Puritan Society

Welcome to the lecture “Putting it to Memory: Speech and Memorization in Puritan Society.” I remember once when I memorized Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech, from *Romeo and Juliet*, for extra credit in my ninth grade English class. I still remember parts of it. I didn’t have the opportunity to do this very much again in school, though. In my own experience, memory is not a skill that is heavily taught and used. However, things were different in early New England. Memory actually played a crucial role in society. In this lecture I’ll focus on the role of memory in oral societies, or societies which used spoken words exclusively, as well as New England Puritan society, which used both oral and written words. In this lecture I will explore a catechism, or text for teaching religious principles, written by John Cotton. The learning goals are for you to be able to identify why memory played a crucial role in oral societies; examine a text for “oral residue”; and understand how catechisms were used in early New England.

First, what is the role of memory in oral societies? The role of memory in oral societies is a popular paradigm amongst scholars of orality. Before we answer that question, let’s clarify what we mean by “oral societies.” One scholar of orality, Walter Ong, describes “primary oral societies” as those societies which have essentially not been exposed to any form of writing. For example, we can think of Ancient Greece at the time of Homer as a primary oral society. Homer’s poetry arose from a time when people’s communications consisted of spoken words much more than written ones. Homer’s time period of what we think of as “Homeric Greece” is approximately 1200-800 BC (“The Homeric Age”). Another example are ancient Israelites during Old Testament times. Many of the stories from the Old Testament were transmitted orally, even if scribes wrote them down at some point later in history (Person 602). When I say “oral societies” I generally mean societies that predominantly used spoken words.

Scholar Walter Ong can help us to understand the role of memory in oral societies. He asks: What kind of knowledge do people in primary oral societies have? That is, what kind of information can people access, if they are not using the written word? Is this information stored somewhere? Of course, in societies that make strong use of literacy and the electronic or digital, information might be stored in print books, in paper documents in file cabinets, and in hard disks for computers. But in primary oral societies, people would normally store information in their mind. Any other nonwritten system, like putting notches in sticks, for example, would not work effectively, accordingly to Ong (34).<sup>1</sup> One’s mind would be the best storage space, so human memory took the brunt of humans’ need for knowledge storage.

Thus, according to Ong, memory became highly significant in oral societies because it was the way to retrieve and make use of information. Memory was so important, in fact, that Ong says *knowledge itself* was shaped by memory. What that means is that much of what was known and said in primary oral societies manifested itself in a memorable way. Its form was memorable; it was mnemonic.

What is a memorable, or “mnemonic” form? Ong describes a few ways in which thought is expressed memorably. First, societal knowledge tends to have rhythm in its expression (Ong 34-5). That means that the syllables or the sounds will occur in a regular pattern. You can remember sounds of words more easily when they are in a pattern. Many nursery rhymes started as part of an oral tradition (Galway). They have rhythm to make them easier to remember. One example is the song “Baa baa, black sheep”: “Baa, baa, black sheep, / Have you any wool? / yes

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<sup>1</sup> It would be hard to store detailed information with something like the notch system, according to Ong, though, one might argue that something like quipus, a kind of technology from the ancient Incas, could function effectively.

sir, yes sir, / three bags full..." The song lends itself very well to rhythm because the first and third lines have the same number of syllables and the first two words in the line are repeated, creating a pattern in how they are pronounced from the first to the third line. "Yes sir, yes sir" also allows for a pattern in emphasis.

Secondly, oral knowledge might have repetition: of ideas, sounds or words (Ong 34; 39-40). Repeated words and ideas serve as markers to make things easier to remember. They might also serve as "building blocks" to allow people to construct and remember elaborate stories. For example, in *The Odyssey*, which was originally remembered and recited out loud in a primary oral context, many phrases are repeated: "gray-eyed Athena"; "wine-dark sea" etc. These repeated phrases are also known as "formulas." Scholars refer to poems or songs composed in oral societies as containing many "formulas."

Oral knowledge might have antithesis, which is when opposite words, ideas, or phrases get paired together (Ong 34). This can make things easier to remember-knowing that there is a pairing in which things have some kind of connection makes it easier to remember the two things.

Oral knowledge has certain kinds of sound patterns that allow for easier memorization. This includes alliteration and assonance (Ong 34). Alliteration happens when words beginning with the same sounds are used together. For example, "terrible turtle." Assonance occurs when two similar vowels are placed next to each other. For example, "fit bit," which is also an example of rhyme; or "there is **no** place like **home**."

Now, let's look at early New England. Was memory as important there as in oral societies? Early New England would not be considered a primary oral society because there was definitely a segment of the population who knew how to read or write; however, literacy was far from universal in this time and spoken words were still a main method of communication (See my lecture on literacy in early New England, "So How Literate Was Early New England?" for more information on this topic]. So was memory still important? Actually, several scholars indicate that memory still played an important role in early New England. For example, one scholar, Jane Kamensky, describes how some Puritans from Essex county remembered things that had been said even twenty years ago. She also says that if Puritans testified in court, it seemed to be standard that they remember various details from past conversations (Kamensky 13). Memory still seems important even if the Puritans did have the technology of writing. Another scholar, Reay, shows us that memory can continue to shape thought even in societies with writing. Reay describes several formulas and proverbs present in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England, which had writing, including "Of sufferance cometh ease"; "Better half a loaf than no bread," "Look high and fall into a cow-turd" (6). Reay describes how writing itself then contained elements like repetition, rhythm, cliches, and epithets.

It seems memory still shaped thought in Puritan society. It seems, then, that Puritan society had some "oral residue," as Walter Ong would say, some kind of remnant of oral ways and oral influences. Let's examine catechisms in Puritan society for any remnants of these oral influences. Catechisms are usually composed of alternating question and answers about basic doctrines in faith. Puritan catechisms often cover topics like the Apostle's creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's prayer. They also cite certain Bible verses to back up the accuracy of the answers.

Let's look at a specific catechism: John Cotton's *Milk for Babes. Drawn out of the breasts of both testaments*. The author of this catechism, John Cotton, was a minister. He moved to America from England in 1633. It is a 13-page catechism so it is not very long. Here are the

first five questions in *Milk for Babes*, to give you a sense of what it is like: “Q. What hath God done for you? A. God hath made me (a) He keepeth me, and He can save me. Q. Who is God? A. God is a Spirit of (b) himself and for himself. Q. How many Gods be there? A. There is but one God in three Persons, (c) the Father, the Sonne, and the Holy Ghost. Q. How did God make you? A. In my first parents (d) holy and righteous. Qu. Are you then born holy and righteous? A. No, my first father (e) sinned, and I in him (Cotton 1).

Learning the catechism required the skill of memory. Children were expected to memorize the catechism. Adults sometimes memorized it too (Grant). But, how else can we see “oral residue” in this specific printed catechism by John Cotton? Can we detect “oral residue” within its written and printed form? I will examine how this catechism by John Cotton reveals some of the lingering “orality” in written and printed texts in this time period. The catechism was written and printed but the way in which it was written reflects some attributes of speech shaped by the limits of memory.

First, one aspect of the “oral residue” of the catechism is that it has repetition and a consistent format. One example is the first answer to the first question. The first question is, “What hath God done for you?” and the first answer is “God hath made me, He keepeth me, [and] He can save me.” This answer has three parts-God hath made me; He keepeth me; He can save me- with four syllables each. This consistent, parallel structure helps with memorization. Another instance of parallel structure occurs in this question-and-answer set: “Quest. What is the duty here commanded? Answ. To get our goods honestly, to keepe them safely, and to spend them thriftily” (Cotton 5). This answer also has three parts, which all start with a verb that takes an object and end with an adverb.

Another quality of this catechism is its “agonism.” Most of the time “agonism” in the context of orality refers to how argumentative or aggressive something is. We might not detect especially aggressive bits because this is a catechism used with children, but there are parts that are more confrontational. Scholar DN Keane examines the presence of second-person pronouns to detect a sense of argumentation (“Let me heare”). However, Keane examines two other catechisms, which the Puritans may have used, in his article. The very first question of Cotton’s catechism does seem a little more agonistic. It is, “What hath God done for you?” It confronts the person being asked this question with a personal topic and makes them think about their own experiences. Compare this with the first question of the Westminster shorter catechism, another catechism that the New England Puritans might have used: “What is the chief and highest end of man? Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy Him forever.” The Westminster question is a little more abstract and thus might be more reflective of literacy. But the one from *Milk for Babes* is more concrete and confrontational. It addresses the person directly: “What hath God done for YOU?”

These are some of the features of this text that give it some amount of “oral residue.” Can we conclusively say that these features arise from the orality of society? Do these features conclusively demonstrate that the catechism was influenced by the role of memory? One might bring up, for example, the fact that we are analyzing a printed version of the catechism. Can examination of written language allow for reliable conclusions about the degree of orality in a society? Why is the written version necessary if the catechism was meant to be memorized? We’ll not address all of these questions now (one of them is a discussion question that you can write about in the discussion forums). Scholars have discussed similar issues, however. David D. Hall points out the blend of spoken words, written words, and memory in 17<sup>th</sup>-century New England. He shows that people learned to read often by memorizing texts, hearing them spoken

out loud, and saying them out loud themselves. Even when people were focusing on the medium of the written word—as in when they were learning to read—spoken words were crucial in this process of literacy. Children were often required to memorize texts in order to learn how to read them.

In this lecture I have discussed the crucial role of memory in primary oral societies. I present Walter Ong's idea that knowledge and thinking in oral societies were often mnemonic in nature—they contained various features like rhythm and rhyme to make them more suited for being retained in one's memory. I then show how even societies exposed to literacy emphasized memory and orality. This can be seen in various accounts of the time or records of people's speech. Finally, I examine the use of catechisms in Puritan society and specifically John Cotton's catechism to show how written texts might even contain oral features. The act of catechizing itself also reveals how memory was a crucial part of Puritan society, even and especially when people began to learn to read, as children. Now, share what you think. What texts do you know that might have "oral residue"? What are other examples, from the present or history, of memory being heavily used in society? I look forward to reading your answers in the discussion forums. Happy writing!

Discussion question 1: Choose a poem or another text you can think of, that might have "oral residue," and examine it by identifying any features that may have been shaped by the importance of memory in oral societies. Was this text ever required to be memorized? Why or why not?

Discussion question 2: Is it adequate and logically sound to inspect a written text for "oral" features inspired by memory? Why or why not? (see some of the related questions in the second to last paragraph of this lecture) What are the limitations or implications that would come with analyzing a written text for "oral residue"?

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