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Look and Feel: Early New England Books

Welcome to the lecture “Look and Feel: Early New England Books” in this course! Maybe we don’t think very much about our experience of reading a physical book: what it is like to take a book off a shelf, open it, hold it or put it on a table, and turn its pages. It’s an experience that differs from reading digital books, which might include opening up a laptop or tapping a kindle to turn it on. In this lecture I’ll describe what it was like for Puritans to flip through and read a book, and then indicate what this might tell us about the Puritans and their media. I’ll address questions like, what did Puritan books look like? What did they feel like when you held them? What were they made of? In this lecture I’ll also present one scholar’s analysis as well as my own. The learning goals are for you to be able to describe either some different sizes of Puritan books, what they were made of, or the designs on their covers; and to identify one way that Puritan books tell us more about Puritan culture or their media.

First, let’s look at what books in early New England looked like and felt like. There were different sizes of books, categorized by the number of folds the printer would have made in a typical piece of printer’s paper to make the pages of the books. Here are some frequent sizes. Twelvemo (duodecimo) books are quite small, about 7 to 8 inches tall. They are made from a piece of printer’s paper folded 4 times, which produces 12 leaves-12 separate pieces of paper—or 24 pages. Octavo books are 8 to 10 inches tall. Quarto books are 10 to 13 inches tall. Quartos are made of paper folded twice, producing 4 separate leaves—or 8 pages (“Book Formats”).

Book covers might be made of wood, including scabbard, which is a thin board of oak, birch, or maple wood; or, pasteboard, made up of multiple sheets of paper stuck together (see Brown 91-102 for more information). Book covers in turn could be covered by leather, vellum, or paper. Leather and vellum are both skins from animals like sheep, cows, or goats. The difference between them is that leather goes through the tanning process which protects it more from rotting, while vellum has not gone through tanning. Leather has a slightly grainy feel, depending on the type, while vellum feels rather smooth. Sheepskin was a common kind of skin used, whether for leather or vellum, because it was cheaper and more durable (Spawn 31-2). It also was a little coarser than others.

Let’s talk about designs on the books. Book covers had different designs. Many book covers were decorated using blind tooling. Blind tooling is making an impression into leather, often by using a heated tool. No color was usually put into the impressions, though—thus the term “blind tooled.” (When gold color was put in the impression, the practice was known as “gold tooling.”) One of the most common book cover styles was blind-tooled lines close to the four edges of the book, forming a rectangle. Another was two of these rectangles nested inside of each other on the cover, with a decorative floral-looking stamp on the corners of the outside rectangle (Spawn 31).

Now that you have heard about the material dimensions of a Puritan book, try putting the details together in your head and imagine picking up a book in Puritan society in early New England. Think about opening the covers, which might have blind-tooled designs, designs felt just as much as seen. Flip through the pages, feeling the rough sheepskin of the cover, and consider whether it is a quarto, duodecimo, octavo, or another size.

We are going to focus on one particular book. The book we will discuss is *An Answer of the Elders of the Severall Churches in New-England unto Nine Positions* by Richard Mather, specifically the copy bound for Increase Mather. The book is about 7.6 inches tall by 5 inches

wide- therefore, it might be a twelvemo book. The inside of the book states that the printers are “TP” and “MS” and that it was printed in London in 1643. Scholars know the book was bound together, however, in around 1680 in America by John Ratcliffe. It was not uncommon for books’ pages to be printed in London, shipped to America, and then bound together in America. This particular version of the book was bound for Increase Mather (Spawn 39). The book cover is made of sheepskin and the covers consist of a single rectangle in the middle as well as lines framing the outer edges, all blind-tooled (Spawn 38). Increase Mather’s name is inside, written as “I. Mather” (Spawn 39).

Now that we know some more about the materiality of early New England books, how might we use this information to find out even more about Puritan society? One scholar, Matthew Brown, points out that these material aspects of books, like their size and texture, are significant for understanding how the Puritans perceived the act of reading and how they understood themselves. He indicates that it is not just the so-called “content” of the book that is important, but the physical experience of holding a book itself. Brown proposes that how Puritans physically experienced reading can reveal their spiritual and psychological state. In his book *The Pilgrim and the Bee* Brown states that he is developing a “phenomenology of reading” for the Puritans (xi). Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that focuses on humans’ perception and experience in the world. Brown is using this term here partly to describe his emphasis on the book as a physical object and how the Puritans were experiencing and recognizing it. Brown uses the terms “hand piety” and “eye piety” to describe Puritans’ physically moving their hands and moving their eyes while reading. Ultimately, he links these experiences with a corresponding internal piety—what the Puritans called “heart piety.” Brown shows how it is the turning of pages, flipping to the index, feeling the leather cover with one’s hand as well as gazing at a dynamic image and following it with one’s eyes that can lead to increased devotion towards God in one’s heart and soul. The physical experience of reading conveyed some of the heart transformation going on as people read devotional literature or the Bible and sought God. For Brown, feeling the sheepskin book covers reminds one of Jesus’ role as a shepherd and physically links sheep to human. Fingering a blind tooled design at the edges of a book cover marks a moment of intensity and anticipation as one starts reading the devotions within. Using the index to flip to different sections of a book shows the “turn” of people’s hearts to God and allows people to experience the openness and accessibility of faith and trusting God.

Brown’s analysis has some strengths, but I believe just analyzing the materiality of books in this way does not fully capture the significance of this materiality. He also might explore the historical context of these material aspects, such as the history of the binding techniques and how Puritan books fit into this history. This is one criticism that you could make: that Brown does not draw upon details of the physical nature of the book more in his analysis. That is, the material nature of the book remains slightly untapped still- it might reveal even more than he conjectures. What does the physical book tell us about Puritan media and its history? How do the physical aspects of the book shape what the experience of reading and understanding was like? Now, I will propose an alternative way of analyzing the material aspects of Puritan books.

It is my contention that Puritan books reveal to us how literacy was more of a sensorily rich experience than we might expect, not a depleted, secondary experience compared to the richness of oral soundscapes, but rather just as rich and vibrant. Reading in Puritan New England contained both visual and tactile stimuli. In fact, there were a variety of covers with different textures, and these textures impacted the reading experience. The textured book covers can show us that reading might be as much a tactile as a visual experience. McLuhan famously says that

literacy brought about an “eye for an ear,” but Puritan books show us that reading also involves a “hand for an ear” (McLuhan 84). McLuhan’s phrase “eye for an ear” means that literacy seems to extend our sense of seeing to a high degree, at the expense of hearing. When reading, we are attuned to what things look like—that is how we are able to recognize the words on the page. For McLuhan, this means we lose out on the sense of hearing because we’re not using that sense. But for the Puritans, who grasped book after book that were varying sizes, of varying textures and tooled designs, the sense of touch may have been just as important as the sense of sight. The book might have seemed an extension of their hands. Reading became as much about detecting the patterns and variations in texture of book covers as about recognizing the words on the page. Holding a book involved feeling the indentations around the cover and along the spine. Books, then, did not represent such an abrupt change in sensory organization as McLuhan might indicate. Books were sensual objects that revealed nuances and difference when they were held. Implicit in my analysis is the important topic of bookbinding. Indeed bookbinding scholar Mirjam Foot argues that the study of bookbindings is “part of the mainstream of social history” in her lectures delivered at the British Library (1). Foot shows us how bindings can reflect books’ role in societal gift exchanges. Foot says, “The ways in which the purpose of a book influences its format, and especially its appearance, can be seen when books are given as presents, either to rich and mighty patrons, where the position of the social standing of the recipient is reflected in the lavishness of the binding...or...in order to mark special occasions, such as births, marriages, deaths, or—less dramatic—successful education” (55). In early New England the way a book was bound, even if the text inside was the same, could reveal much about who might have owned it and what it had been used for. Bindings could change how someone experienced their environment. They help us to see books as media objects that convey information in a variety of ways.

Let’s go back to our case study book, Richard Mather’s *An Answer of the Elders of the Severall Churches in New-England unto Nine Positions*, again. The specific version we are looking at was bound by John Ratcliff and belongs to Increase Mather. It was printed in London in 1643 and bound around 1680 (Spawn 39). It has sheepskin binding. The binder, John Ratcliff, had moved to New England to bind a version of the Bible translated into the Wampanoag language, one of the projects of the missionary John Eliot (Holmes 33). Some care seems to have been given to the book’s bindings. The binding is made of sheepskin and the covers and spine are blind-tooled. Furthermore, the author of the book is the book owner’s father, so probably this book was a special one for Increase Mather! The fact that it was especially bound in New England by a book binder who had moved there just a few years ago indicates that Increase Mather might have found this book somewhat significant in his life. The pages of the book were printed in London in 1643; someone would have then asked Ratcliff to bind the book together in America. Ratcliff came over in 1663 so the earliest the book could have been bound would be about 20 years after the pages were printed, but an estimate for the time of its creation is 1680, which is almost 40 years after the book was printed (Spawn 39). Increase Mather must have waited some time to have the pages bound. This book concerns the response of ministers in New England to nine statements from ministers in old England, statements largely about the structure and practices of churches. As Mather opened this book and read about these different theological positions, he would have grasped the sturdy covers of a bound book. He would have felt the central blind-tooled rectangle on the cover and the large rectangle outlining the book (Spawn 39). He might have let the book fall open while resting on his palm and noticed the tooling on the spine. These material aspects shaped his reading experience: it was not just about reading the text

on the page, but holding and touching an object that was especially crafted. He was “reading” but it was a kind of reading that also involved feeling and handling a distinct object and considering all the thoughts and ideas attached to that object, including the memory of his relationship with his father and theological ideas his father might have shared with him.

In this lecture I’ve described the material aspects of New England books and some different ways to interpret these aspects. I’ve described three major sizes of Puritan books, what the covers were made of, and what the covers might have felt like. I then presented scholar Matthew Brown’s ideas; he performs a phenomenology of reading that demonstrates how the reading experience enacts religious piety. I provide an interpretation in which I suggest reading is a rich sensory experience that could be compared to orality. I indicate that written words were often accompanied by tactile sensations in early New England. Books were a medium that was more “cool” than “hot,” to use McLuhan’s terms, because several senses are being extended instead of one in great depth. What do you think? What do you think about Brown’s analysis and my analysis of Puritan books? Share your thoughts in the course forums and respond to another student’s idea to keep the conversation going. Keep on listening to some other lectures in this unit to think critically about various kinds of Puritan media.

Discussion question 1: What do you think about Brown’s idea that the physical experience of reading can embody religious piety? Do you agree with this or not and why? What are some details about Puritan books that might support or refute his points?

Discussion question 2: Perform a phenomenology of reading on smartphones. What does the physical experience of reading on a smartphone reveal about people today? Analyze these statements: If the physical experience of opening a book intensifies the religious experience—the feeling of animal skin and the blind-tooling on the skin marking a certain beginning—then the smartphone, far from intensifying, seems to diminish the experience. When we use it we get the same feeling or texture almost all the time, no matter the text, and there are not as many embossed patterns for one’s hand to feel.

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