Yi He
Speaking, Writing, and Fighting in Early New England

Welcome to the lecture "Speaking, Writing, and Fighting in Early New England." One issue that some scholars have discussed is why Puritan society did not contain large amounts of internal fighting and violence in a time when this kind of conflict was relatively common. What do you think? First, is the situation described—that Puritan society did not contain large amounts of internal fighting and violence—even true? And if so, why was this the case? What scholars—notably Timothy Breen and Stephen Foster—mean by the relative amount of internal peace in early New England –is that there were few violent mobs and organized attacks within Puritan society. Of course, there was crime, and there were tensions and disagreements. But according to Breen and Foster, there was little large-scale organized violence within the society. In this lecture we'll explore the question of internal violence more and I'll posit that the answer might have more to do with the Puritans' media, rather than Puritan beliefs and institutions, than we'd think. The learning goals are for you to be able to describe how argumentation and conflict play a role in oral societies. Let's get started!

So first, Timothy Breen and Stephen Foster address the question of Puritans' relative internal peace in their essay "The Puritans' Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts," which examines New England Puritan society from about 1630-1680. They start out describing the stability of early New England, pointing out a lack of riots and mobs when the Virginia and Maryland colonies and European countries had their own share of explosive internal conflict. They mention Anne Hutchinson's disagreements with prominent ministers and the war with some Native people, King Philip's War, of course but describe how neither of these contribute to coordinated violent attacks *within* the colony itself. They write, "What was exceptional about the Bay Colony was the absence of internal, organized violence" (7). There were no violent takeovers of power or large riots when the Puritans were first settling in New England. In their article, Breen and Foster defend three reasons for this situation. The first reason is commonly held systematic beliefs; the second is an organized and clear judicial system; and the third is a lack of diseases, famines, and international wars.

However, what about if the answer to why this situation occurred lies in the Puritans' media? Could media affect how much violence there is in society? Today we'll investigate the links between media, especially speech, and violence in Puritan society. The 16th- and 17th-centuries in Europe were times of media transition—particularly in the shift from an emphasis on orality, or spoken words, to an emphasis on literacy, or written words, in society. Walter Ong details this transition and some of the accompanying societal changes in this period. Ong describes how the shift from an oral age to a literate age involved a decline in the combative nature of academic discussion. But it also involved a slight decline in open, public aggression in general. Ong writes, "It is not that individuals in technologized cultures necessarily feel fewer hostilities than did earlier man, but only that earlier cultures on the whole (for these cultures differed much among themselves) displayed hostilities more overtly as an expected response to the environment" (195). Obviously, aggression and hostility can occur in societies with writing, as we know from our society today. But Ong states that in primary oral societies or those with heavy oral influence, this hostility was made ever more apparent and definite. I will explain why: oral societies are supposed to have high degrees of connection and relationship with each other. This manifests, also, in a mindset that perceives the world according to changes in human relationships and human actors. Happenings, whether good or bad, commonly are explained as a

result of what someone *did.* It was hard to access a variety of philosophical or abstract explanations for various happenings, since these explanations had to be stored in books. A more apparent degree of hostility was expected in a world in which most of what was thought had to be said to other people—there were always people around you to engage with your thoughts and these people would often form the subject of your thoughts. Ong gives examples of the Ancient Greeks, the Ancient Romans, and the ancient Hebrews as oral societies which have experienced greater overt hostilities (196). As a note, not just hostilities were possible—a greater kind of bondedness and connection can be apparent, too, in oral societies. People had to talk to each other more. They had to listen to each other.

Let us consider how the opposite of what we have talked about might happen in societies with a high degree of literacy. Writing tends to involve more distance between people. One can read a text alone. One can do the kind of extended thinking that results in writing a long text, alone. A person can achieve more objectivity with the knowledge they have because they can access this knowledge outside of a conversation with other people. It is easy to access this information in a written document, then develop and refine this knowledge by yourself.

The Puritans were located in this period of shifting media, from large-scale orality to large-scale literacy. I argue that it is precisely their focus on written, abstract ideals of their beliefs that led to this period of relative peace in their society. While European countries around them were engulfed in conflict such as the English revolution, the Catalan reaper's war in Spain, and the discontinuation of the German electoral college, the Puritans were not experiencing widespread, manifest hostilities in their own society (Harrington qtd. in Breen and Foster 5). The 17th-century is precisely a point at which old oral currents were leading to newer literate currents. The Puritans might have gotten there a little faster, while several European countries were still experiencing the manifest aggression that might spring from orality.

The Puritans clearly had oral currents running in their society, which I discuss in other lectures. However, they also made use of literacy and specifically made use of literacy by allowing for its capacity for abstraction. Even if there were strong oral currents, there were also strong currents of literacy in their society. Some of their oral activities were mixed with literate ones, such as listening to sermons and taking notes at the same time. Many of the Puritans were captivated by somewhat abstract ideals of what their society was going to be. Many times, these ideals were expressed in writing. For example, the Puritans were captivated by this sense of going to New England as an "errand"—a task that they had gone out to do—something that might initially have been *for* the church in England, to reform it, but later became *for* their own purposes (Miller 4-8).[1] This ideal of their *own* errand, that they were to accomplish a renewed society, became more and more real to them. Multiple sermons describe this topic: Samuel Danforth's *A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness;* John Higginson's *The Cause of God and His People in New-England;* William Stoughton's *New England's True Interest, Not to Lie,* and more (these are pulled from Miller 3). Cotton Mather in his extensive history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana,* frames the story of New England in a similar way: as one in which the Puritans had gone to a new land to escape corruption and to create something new. This ideal of a new society, their *own* new society led them towards abstract notions of what it might be. It was present in various writings and talked about in sermons. This abstract ideal captured people's imaginations, and its ramification were best expressed, developed, and argued about in a systematic way through writing. This focus on writing and the development of more abstract ideas of what their purpose was in this land did not

[1] See Perry Miller's "Errand into the Wilderness"

necessarily make the Puritans more peace-loving, but it did discourage extremely expressive form of tension and aggression. They might not have had as many face-to-face arguments, which might be more explosive, but rather, discussed this issue of the new society in publications and writings to each other.

In conclusion, I suggest that the reason the Puritans seemed to have some amount of peace and stability in their society has to do with their media. Their focus on the abstract ideal of the new society that they were a part of changed the kinds of hostilities and tensions that built up and made them less overtly expressed. Though the medium of spoken words played a big role in their society, written words played a role, too [see my lecture on literacy in early New England for more details]. Several Puritans focused on expressing what they thought about the kind of society they were going to be in, through writing. That prevented them from arguing in-person and making especially provocative statements to each other. Hostilities did not go away, but rather became suppressed into a less visible form. Now it's your turn to respond. What do you think about my application of the concept that orality led to more aggressive conflict and literacy, to less? I look forward to reading your responses in the discussion forums!

Discussion question 1: Can you think of any significant writings or set of writings by the Puritans that might challenge the thesis that they were extremely focused on the abstract ideal of forming a new society? (You can refer to other texts in this lecture: *Magnalia Christi Americana, the Bay Psalm Book,* John Cotton's catechism etc.). Do you think media was the reason for the relative stability of Puritan society? Why or why not?

Discussion question 2: What do you think of Ong's idea that orality is associated with more overt aggression (as well as overt human connection and bonding)? Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with this quote and why: "Little wonder that social institutions were interpreted in polemic [argumentative] or quasipolemic terms [in oral societies] with an insistence that strikes us as bizarre. Renaissance treatises for educating the courtier, for example, such as Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* or Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Book Named the Governor,* are more likely to trace governmental failures deriving as we now know, from complex economic, social, political, and psychological 'forces,' to enemies among the king's advisors—"bad guys." Book prefaces and dedications, curiously enough, provide an excellent sampling of how man felt his life-world as late as the age immediately following the development of print. Hostility here manifests itself not merely in the excoriation of various persons (often enough including the printer) but also in praising patrons or other dedicatees, for the writer of dedications commonly pictures the dedicatee as surrounded by hosts of enemies from whom the author and his friends gallantly propose to defend him" (Ong 199).

Additional Reading and Works Cited

Breen, Timothy H., and Stephen Foster. “The Puritans’ Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts.” *The Journal of American History (Bloomington, Ind.)*, vol. 60, no. 1, 1973, pp. 5–22, https://doi.org/10.2307/2936326.

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