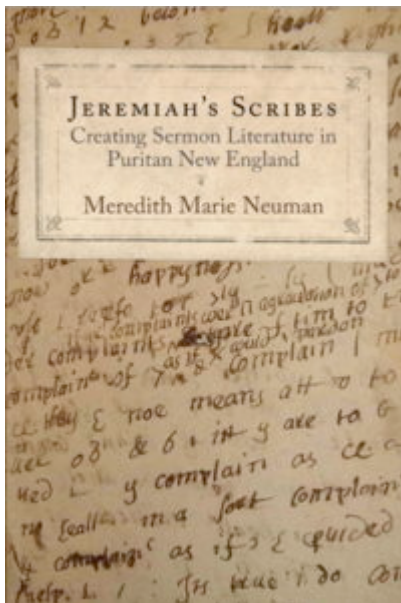
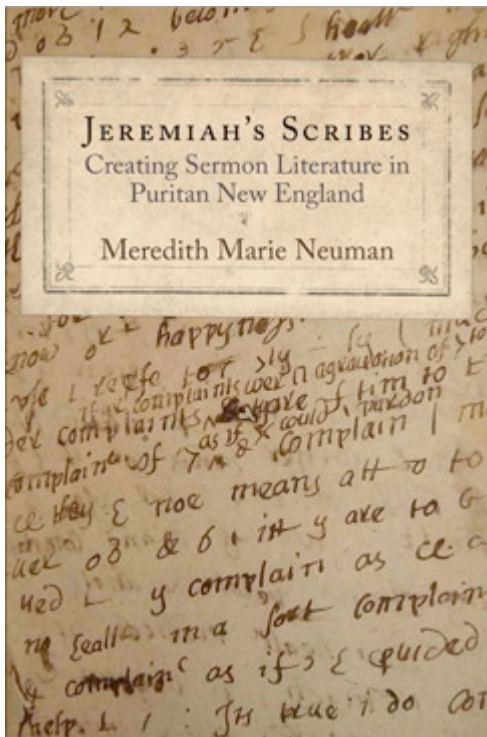


Sermon-Ridden



Meredith Marie Neuman, *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 280 pp., \$69.95.

Taking up the scurrilous charge—"ours has been a notably sermon-ridden literature from the beginning"—as a judicious assessment, Meredith Marie Neuman's book *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England* argues that all Puritan literature is a subset of the sermon. To understand Puritan literature requires a firm sense of sermon culture. This demands not so much a search for accurate content—*what did ministers actually*

say given that we have no word for word transcriptions?—but a realignment of our scholarly questions to accord with the Puritan's concern—*how effectual were their words?* Reorienting the study of the Puritan sermon around efficacy rather than accuracy shifts the axis of interpretation away from the print sermon as the gold standard and toward a nonlinear amalgam of manuscript, print, and oral practices that make up sermon culture. In so doing, ministerial control morphs into dispersed authorship, exegetical habits become genre conventions, and linguistic and spiritual fallibility break open into a promising debility.

Harry Stout first argued in his groundbreaking study *The New England Soul* (1986) that manuscript rather than print sermons provided a more accurate representation of the information ingested by the everyday Puritan (who clocked about 15,000 hours of sermon time in her lifetime). He reoriented a whole swath of scholarship that had relied on print sermons, which represented only a fraction of the sermons preached, by basing his arguments on the thematic content of an impressive assortment of manuscript sermons. Neuman returns to Stout's insight to instigate another fundamental shift: hearing sermons helped create them. If we simply need to rely on more manuscript sermons after Stout, after Neuman we need to read them as part of an interactive sermon culture that includes an array of aural, textual, and material practices, in order to grasp, not the content, but the experience of the sermon as it circulated in New England and abroad. Neuman assembles a rich archive that she nimbly collates to approximate this sermon encounter at the moment of delivery and in its multiple afterlives. By situating herself firmly within the now-established approach to religion as lived experience, she naturally bridges book history and—what is the central contribution of her monograph—the study of Puritan auralty.

The book progresses through two main stages. The first reorients our sense of what sermons are and how we might read them, while the second investigates how the logic of the sermon undergirds all of Puritan literature. Chapter one destabilizes the sermon as a single-author genre that neither disappeared as it was spoken nor crystalized in print. Relying on what has been for some time a common understanding of authorship in studies of early modern England, Neuman establishes the eclectic and communal life of the American Puritan sermon as it moved through the nonlinear and permeable forms of oral, print, and manuscript. To read these texts that developed communally along circuitous routes one must recognize, Neuman argues, that the various forms are dialogically engaged.

But understanding, for instance, that the notes taken while listening to sermons are in conversation with the original delivery and with the eventual print version is one thing; figuring out how to read these documents is quite another. Anyone who has looked at these strange manuscripts knows (and there is a wonderful assortment of images within the book), auditor notes do not yield up their secrets easily. The primary strength of Neuman's book lies in her perceptive and witty analysis of this common, yet largely unread, genre of manuscripts. She fleshes out a range of highly individualized notetaking practices and strategies and identifies three general paradigms for ease of classification: the structural auditor (the person who produces outlines

according to sermon heads); the content auditor (the notetaker who focuses on units of meaning rather than relational logic); and the aural auditor (the listener who strives to transcribe the minister's words verbatim). In doing so, she stresses both the subjective experience of hearing and the shared practices of aurality, which enables her to cull a wealth of information about the creation of the notes (for instance, most auditors wrote their notes in the meetinghouse and continued to work on them at home) and the sermon event (such as common changes in recording style at the end of sermons indicate that most sermons sped up at the end).

This balance of the individual and communal forms extends into the material analysis of the notebooks themselves. Neuman finds both distinct personalities (even in unsigned notes) and shared writing practices that engage both the spoken sermon and print. For example, an anonymous auditor, whom Neuman dubs "Voracious Auditor," is an aural notetaker who captures the cadence and emotion of the sermon. For the skilled Harvard student John Chickering, content seems most important, which he highlights not only through his notetaking style but also in his meticulous index. The less skilled content auditor, the layman Michael Metcalfe, records sermons in a handmade book carefully crafted to resemble the oblong notebooks popular for auditing sermons. Though he appears to have had no formal training, he nonetheless proudly announces "my 2 vollum that I made of this Sort of Works," a moment Neuman marks as his declaration that he is "a record keeper of self and community" (90). Most importantly for her argument, the taxonomy of auditor types remains flexible enough to demonstrate a common sermon culture while also claiming that each notetaker "authors his or her own aural experience" in a material book envisioned as a "unique, personal creation" (30).

But auditors not only produced their own books, they also crafted the notes that became the basis for the print version of the sermon. And, because the primary hope of the Puritan sermon was efficacy rather than accuracy, the aural experience they recorded transferred easily to the print form. Neuman's third chapter traces the ways that aurality and its accompanying subjectivity became part of the formal structure of print sermons. The printed Puritan sermon is notoriously difficult for modern readers because of its unbalanced structure in which some points seem to branch out endlessly (typical of the Ramist style that the Puritans followed). Rather than a flaw, Neuman reads this as "a tacit grammar of strategic imperfection" produced by the energy of the structure—which she characterizes as a centrifugal force that sweeps up the minister, auditors, and readers in a dialogic form (114). It is this messy interplay between the words of the minister and the experience of the hearer that produces the lived truth or application of the sermon.

This productive in-between space becomes central for understanding Puritan literature and its most distinctive feature: bringing experience in line with revelation. Neuman explains in chapter four that, contrary to what we might expect, the belief in the fallibility of humans and their language enabled a flood of textual production. The excesses of plain style exegesis that everyday

Puritans habituated, like scriptural collation, figurative reading, and, my favorite, text crumbling (a technique that broke the scriptural text into tiny parts—a word, a comma—for minute analysis), point not toward an unwavering literal reading of Scripture, but toward the creative work of the minister and lay person as they sought the divine word not just at the moment of delivery, but “in linguistic acts of enabled debility” that permeated all of sermon culture (172).

Neuman’s book concludes by moving outward from the specific practices of sermon culture to the multiple literary genres that it enabled. She finds poetry, for instance, the genre most conducive for the Puritan writer to explore linguistic failure and spiritual ability. Her last chapter, though, focuses on the conversion narrative, which she argues should not be understood as a burgeoning form of early autobiography, but as a subgenre of the sermon. Laity applied the habits of exegetical thought learned through listening to sermons to the narration of the soul. In Neuman’s hands, the secret experience of conversion (implicated in all the problems of scriptural exegesis and verging on antinomianism) lies at the center of the conversion narrative that “adapts the methodology of the sermon in order to narrate the unnarratable” (32). But, rather than celebrate Puritan individualism at the expense of community, Neuman’s methodology casts us right back into the interpenetrating forms of sermon literature and culture. It is not that the individual triumphs in salvation morphology (as a late evangelicalism might be described to do), but that the very instability of the language of the soul enables the believer to continue on an expanding exegetical project that cannot exist apart from this shared sermon culture.

Neuman’s book does not overstate its scope or its centrality to a matrix of intersecting disciplines. If anything, it undersells its importance to the history of the sermon, the book, the senses, studies of sentimentality, affect, aesthetics, and religious and American culture more broadly. This is in part because the book, though it fundamentally alters how we understand the genre of the sermon in relation to all other Puritan literature, does not take time to specifically engage these other conversations. Its tightly focused purpose keeps the textured archival materials at the center. Yet, at every turn, the materials Neuman elucidates unfold in multiple directions that will surely inspire conversation from a host of disciplinary perspectives. Like the metaphors Neuman uses for the sermon—a jazz riff, a centrifugal experience regulated by form—her book cannot help but continually push the reader beyond it. If the sermon as permeable, communal, and experiential text is the logic of Puritan literature, for which she makes a compelling case, Neuman’s book is necessary reading not only for every student of Puritanism but, given the *longue durée* of Puritan forms, every student of American literatures and religious cultures.

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