

## The New England Execution Sermon: Texts, Rituals, and Power

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### Abstract

This paper uses the topic of the New England execution sermon to make an argument about how social classes use, and then lose, their power to control communication media. The class in question here is the Puritan clergy, once a dominant group in colonial New England. The author constructs the argument primarily through the use of three different sets of literature. First, the theoretical literature on the use of media technologies as power (Innis, Marvin, and others). Second, the secondary historical literature that already exists on the phenomenon of the execution sermon. Third, the primary sources, which are 73 different sermons listed in the early American imprints series (both First and Second series). I argue that the clergy's loss of control over how to portray the ritualized retribution of the execution provides us with a case study of how dominant classes use media to control populations, and how they lose that control.

**Keywords:** media history, ritual, monopolies of knowledge, execution sermons

Within New England society during much of its early history, the public execution process often included a sermon from a member of the clergy, addressed both to the condemned and to the local congregation. This tradition was one element in the ruling class's strategy of fusing religion with governance. While the execution sermon was not unique to New England, it had a distinctive cast within that culture, and its popularity as both a rhetorical genre and a form of print media there is seemingly without parallel in the Anglo-Saxon world of the time. Crime and violent death were common subjects in the popular media of the age, but most of the historical examples that have come down to us are sensationalist accounts of the crimes themselves, or recordings of the last words of the condemned, not products of a religious elite aiming for the moral education of its flock.

This paper is based on the assumption that these sermons have an important message for 21st century media scholars, irrespective of the message of sin and salvation addressed to their original audience. I want to think about New England executions sermons as an instance in which a particular class of people-- the religious establishment of New England in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries-- used their ability with language both in written and spoken form, their skills in manipulating print technology, and their influence over the institutions related to that technology, to establish their control over the meanings of particular a social ritual, the public execution. In other words, I want to see how people transform media technology into power, and also how they lose that power. The particular

argument developed here is distinctive to this case, but I will suggest at the end of the paper that it can nevertheless suggest certain ways of thinking about media and power that may be generalizable to a broader set of historical questions.

### **The execution sermon as popular print genre and public event:**

The simplest definition of the execution sermon is that it was a sermon delivered to both the local congregation and to the accused prisoner him or herself, either the day of the execution or the Sunday prior. Almost all printed sermons were first preached in churches. The accused sat at the front of the congregation, bound in chains: a potent symbol for the rest of the population of the dangers of social transgression. Formally, the sermons were structured around a text from the Bible: first put forth in a doctrine; then examined more closely, in its various parts or claims, through a set of proofs, or propositions, or inquiries; and finally, serving as the basis of a set of applications, uses, or improvements. The sermon would generally end with two exhortations: one directed to the accused, and a second directed to the congregation.

The first execution sermon appearing in Charles Evans' collection of early American imprints is *The Cry of Sodom*, printed in 1674. Written and delivered by Samuel Danforth, the sermon was occasioned by the impending execution of Benjamin Goad, for the crime of bestiality (Danforth, 1674). The last sermon listed as an execution sermon in the second series of the early American imprints collection is from 1817, delivered by Charles Lowell on the occasion of Henry Phillips Stonehewer Davis's execution for murder (Lowell, 1817).<sup>1</sup> There may have been printed sermons before Danforth's, and there were probably ones after Lowell's (Alden, 1822), but we can roughly establish the period when the sermon existed as popular literature. It began in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, when market competition within the New England printing trade was also starting to develop (Armory, 2007, pp. 89, 90). It probably ended sometime in the 1820s, when other forms of literature like newspapers and sensationalist pamphlets became the main source of popular information about criminals and crime in America (Cohen, 1993, pp. 13-16; Halttunen, 1998, pp. 35, 36).

The execution sermon is associated almost exclusively with New England, to the point where Daniel Cohen has argued that "the execution sermon as an autonomous literary genre seems to have been an invention of New England Puritans (Cohen, 1988, p. 147)." Although sermons were a common element of executions throughout Britain and Europe more generally, Cohen distinguishes the New England sermon as unique primarily because of the social prominence of the authors: men like the Mathers (Increase and Cotton), Charles Chauncey, and Benjamin Colman (Cohen, 1988, p. 147). Indeed, Stuart Banner notes that some

young and ambitious preachers tended to view the execution as a useful method of reaching large numbers of people, with an immediate listening audience of thousands--much larger than a normal Sunday service. That audience could then be extended through print (Banner, 2002, pp. 32-34). A certain social prominence can also be assigned to the sermon itself. In the British Isles, execution sermons were often short affairs. New England's execution sermons can run to over 40 or 50 printed pages. As for the other colonies, evidence suggests that the execution sermon did not travel well: only a few examples exist for the Middle Atlantic colonies and states, and they are essentially non-existent for the southern states (Alden, 1822; Graham, 1759; Hunt, 1796; Woodruff, 1804).

The historical analysis that has been conducted on the sermons tends to fall into one of two general approaches. Some writers see the sermons in a context of the wider religious discourse of colonial America, as a rhetorical genre. This research often looks for what distinguished the execution sermon from other types of sermons or religious addresses, and also what was common among different execution sermons: what defined the genre (Minnick 1968; Bosco, 1978). Ronald Bosco, for example, argues that execution sermons were "one of the principle examples of the jeremiad form;" as such, they focused on the covenant established between the Puritans and God, and the younger generation's supposed "declension," or falling off from that covenant (1978, pp. 161, 163). Wayne Minnick creates a typological analysis that highlights common ideas and structures within the sermons (1968, pp. 81, 82). The aims of such arguments result in little if any analysis of how the sermons changed or why they disappeared. They also seem to exaggerate the commonality of the sermons over time. Bosco's identification of the execution sermon with the jeremiad (1978, p. 163) is fairly accurate for the early examples that he focuses upon (Danforth and Cotton Mather), but makes a poorer fit for many later sermons, particularly those in which the accused does not come from within the community.

More recent historical research has highlighted the sermons' status as printed media, rather than as rhetorical performances. Their importance here is primarily as precursors to the true crime narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Karen Halttunen, for example, argues that the execution sermon framed murder in a fundamentally different manner than the sensationalistic popular literature which followed. The accused in an execution sermon "was regarded as a moral representative of all sinful humanity, and was granted an important spiritual role in the early New England community," Halttunen argues (1998, p. 9). She distinguishes this from the later style of the Gothic murder narrative. In the Gothic narrative, the killer is not part of the community, and the murder is not symbolic of essential human depravity, or the judgment of God, or the saving grace of Christ's sacrifice. It is not symbolic of anything at all, since post-Enlightenment American society lacked the sort of moral discourse that could assign it a

meaning. What the new literature provides instead is simply the *frisson* of horror, which morphs into what Halttunen calls "the pornography of violence" (1998, pp. 60-90)

Daniel Cohen sees in the evolution of the execution sermon not a replacement of meaningful narrative with nihilistic sensation but the gradual secularization of popular crime literature: ministers are replaced by a more varied group in the late eighteenth century; in the nineteenth century, journalists, lawyers, and professional authors begin to dominate the literature (Cohen, 1988; 1993). Daniel E. Williams gives a similar account: widespread cultural changes result in a changing style of popular criminal narrative, one in which execution sermons could not find a place:

Once depravity had been abandoned as the catch-all cause for crime, questions arose over motivations, and once the narratives began to examine individual explanations and to present individual characterizations, the traditional foundations of authority were subverted. Through narrative progression, readers became involved in the personalities of the criminal characters, and their involvement contributed to a distrust of authority, if not outright sympathy for the condemned. (Williams, 1993, pp. 19-20)

This essay differs from earlier work on the execution sermon in that it is primarily interested not in the sermons as examples of rhetorical technique nor as early popular literature, but as a set of communication technologies set in relation to other technologies of the period. My argument is that the sermons can be read, on one level, as arguments about the role of various media within the life of colonial American culture. Through their status as material objects, and through the ways in which they referred to other media forms like the Bible, the sermons promoted an implicit set of hierarchies relating to the issue of what made for good communication. Above all, they proposed that print--but print absorbed through the careful instruction of a clerical elite--was the most trustworthy communication, and the most likely to reflect the Ultimate Reality--that is to say, the Will of God-- for their dissenting Protestant congregations. Through this, the sermonizers also made an argument for their own relevance and social power. The decline of the execution sermon can therefore be read as the decline of the power of the clerical class, and of the specific sorts of communication which they favored.

### **Controlling information in colonial New England:**

Harold's Innis's (1972) concept of monopolies of knowledge (taken up and expanded upon by later writers such as James Carey (1989)) is a useful place to begin thinking about the ways in which a social class like the Puritan leadership used media technologies to define social reality in such a way as to defend and advance its power and interests. To control a dominant medium in a society--in the way, say, that ancient Egyptian clerics controlled writing and papyrus--is to set limits on how members of a society think about

fundamental concepts like space, time, and the links between and among generations (Heyer, 2003; Innis, 1964; 1972; Levinson, 1997).

It is important to note here that Innis's use of the term monopoly of knowledge needs to be thought of quite broadly, and would include not only what we normally think of as knowledge--a set of facts and an understanding of these facts' relationship to one another--nor even the set of skills needed to use a particular communication technology (literacy), but also the ability to access various forms of information and material processes (papyrus sheets) relevant to the exercise of the communicative power. Alexander James Watson summarizes the argument nicely:

What is 'monopolized' is the control over the structuring of space and time. The ruling group, organized institutionally (e.g., the Christian church) and backed by a particular type of communication technology (e.g., parchment), maintains its power by formulating a particular conception of time. It is a monopoly, in the case of the church, because the intricate rationalizations of this conception are mastered and actively discussed by a relatively small group of clerics (Watson, 2006, p. 328).

Although critical of some of Innis's concepts and his way of framing the relationship between various forms of technologies, Carolyn Marvin has also explored the politics of media, shifting the emphasis from control over space and time to the battle between the body and the text (Marvin, 1983; 1990). Marvin defines these two binary terms as follows:

Text is the weapon of those whose cultural power derives from educational and other textualizing credentials that exempt them from expending their bodies in pursuit of social resources. Those who are skilled at producing and using texts are most entitled to preserve their bodies and shield them from physical effort and danger. By contrast, the body is the emblem of those without textual credentials, whose bodies are available to be used up by society, and whose power and participation derive from whatever value their bodies have for cultural muscle-work...Among other things, the power of the textual class is the power to dispose of the bodies and lives of the non-textual class. (Marvin and Ingle, 1999, p. 42)

This paper will rely on Marvin's contrast between body and text more than the Innisian distinction between space and time, in large part because Puritan theologians of the seventeenth century make a good fit with her concept of a textual class. Not only their social power but their sense of common identity derived in large part from their knowledge of literary culture, and of Biblical and theological scholarship specifically. Michael Walzer has argued that "Puritan ministers provide, perhaps, the first example of "advanced" intellectuals in traditional society" (Walzer, 1965, p. 121). They were an early version of what would come to be known as the intelligentsia. Often marginalized and persecuted, at least in the beginning, dissenting radicals had only the Word of God as their weapon against the institutionalized power of established church and state hierarchies. This disparity in resources resulted in a theory of communication that celebrated the

text and denigrated those media that the reformers could not control, especially public ceremony, ritual, and theater (Greene, 1991; Karant-Nunn, 1997; Muir, 1997). The Bible obviously was central here, but so too were important printed arguments for Protestant faith like Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, as well as more popular works like Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, more commonly known as the Book of Martyrs. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the Protestant Reformation could ever have succeeded without the printing press (Eisenstein, 1979).

Printed communication, then, was the medium of choice for the Puritan reformers, but not just any kind of printed communication. Puritans favored instead what they called the "plain style" of speaking and writing: simple words and a straightforward syntax, compared to the more convoluted, allusive and learned prose of an earlier generation (Novarr 1967). It was a style more accessible to the mass of the people, a fitter vehicle for modern propaganda. Note, however, that as the plain style was distinct from the learned prose of the elite, so too was it different from the populist printed culture. Printed ballads, broadsheets, plebian literature: this communication was at best suspect in the eyes of religious reformers (Watt 1991). Then too, we should remember that for reformers the deciphering of texts, even prescribed texts like the Bible, required that readers receive appropriate lessons in revealed Truth, so as not to be led astray. Natalie Zemon Davis describes the Protestant attitude as follows: "reading *alone* was not the path to true doctrine. The Protestant method for guaranteeing orthodoxy was in the last instance censorship and punishment; but in the first instance it was *the combination of reading with listening to a trained teacher*" (1991, p. 83. Italics in original). Hence the importance of the sermon, through which the preacher could guide the flock to correct understanding. The sermon was a one-way transmission. It declared, it did not dispute. For a ruling class like colonial New England's, one that lacked many of the military and economic sources of power of its European counterparts, the sermon was a not insignificant instrument of social control. If the early modern reader is a problem for authority as she silently works her way through the verses of the Bible, sitting in front of her hearth, creating her own understandings, without any immediate guidance from her community leadership, then the sermon can be seen in part as the leadership's attempt to regain control, to explain the proper meaning of the words, their proper effect and purpose: otherwise, they end up with Mennochio (Ginzburg, 1992).

Puritans were not liberals, and the New England colonists, most especially their leadership, shared with other members of that religious tradition an ambivalence toward the concepts of unrestricted information, and the open and free discussion of public affairs (for discussions of early modern print culture see Briggs and Burke, 2002; Stephens, 1988; Zaret, 2000). On the one hand, in allowing the controversial pamphlet *Propositions Concerning the Subjects of Baptism and Consociation of Churches* to be published, Massachusetts officials seemed to suggest that, absent heresy, "religious debate was an actual obligation"

(Sloan and Starrt, 1999, p. 31). And yet the colony's leadership was constantly attempting to set the limits on public discourse of religious or political matters, as dissidents and troublemakers like Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, Thomas Lechford, and Benjamin Harris discovered. Although they sometimes made use of outright censorship, colonial authorities also relied on the instrument of prior restraint to help ensure that works which they did not want to see published were not published (Armory, 2007; Glover, 2007).

As was the case with almost every other ruling class in the age of print, attempts to police public discourse were not completely successful. Among their problems was the importation of printed material from Great Britain. Although Britain itself was under fairly strict censorship for much of the seventeenth century, in the form of the Licensing Acts, these acts did not capture all dubious material, especially from the viewpoint of the New England leadership, since the criteria for what was and was not dangerous were different in the Home Country than in the colonies. Almost all of the polemical pamphlets concerning the Puritan executions of four Quakers missionaries in the mid-seventeenth century were published in London (Pestana, 1993).

So much for print. The public communication of the New England colonists did not consist only of elite technologies like texts and the tightly controlled rhetoric of the sermon. There is also the question of public performances to consider, and the way in which such performances changed the relationship of the ruling class to the ruled. If the sovereign power consisted not in the person of the King, who served as the medium through which God communicated to the Christian community, but was rather the combined creation of all members of the Elect, then the populace could not simply be dictated to. It had to be enlisted in the process of ruling. Michael Zuckerman has provided one example of how this was done in his discussion of the New England annual town meeting. Long a paragon of democratic discussion, Zuckerman has argued that the meeting was in fact often tightly controlled by local leadership, who informally set agendas beforehand and discussed methods of ensuring that the debates would not venture out beyond their proper boundaries (Zuckerman, 1968). The more immediate interest here however lies with the question of ritual and communal ceremony.

Twentieth century scholarship has generally tended to assume that Puritanism was opposed to most social ceremonies, whether these were related to sporting events, religious holidays, or churchly ritual, but Leigh Schmidt (2001) has attempted to counter the association of reformers as anti-ritualistic. Protestants of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries wanted to purify ceremonies like the mass, not to eliminate them, Schmidt argues. His evidence is persuasive to a point, although it should be noted that he focuses mainly on presbyterianism, not the congregationalist strain of dissent that we normally associate with the American case, and that even Schmidt is forced to admit uneasiness on the part of leading reformers when confronted with some of the more enthusiastic ceremonies of their flocks (2001, p. 20). Moreover, there

remains a great deal of historical work that documents Puritan opposition to excessive ceremony and improper use of imagery, both popular and religious, as well as the evidence of leading reformers such as Calvin, Luther, Zwingli and Knox, railing against the superstition and ornamentation of the traditional Catholic Mass (Karant-Nunn, 1997; Muir, 1997). Clearly ritual was not entirely absent from colonial life. Like other colonists, New Englanders marked events like the King's birthday and Guy Fawkes (or Pope's Day) with spectacle and ceremony, and they enjoyed civic socializing, albeit sometimes with a guilty pleasure (Gilje, 1996; Middlekauff, 1970). It is nonetheless fair to say that while New England's religious leaders recognized that a certain level of ceremonial life was unavoidable; they were also, often, suspicious of it.

They had good reason to be. Rituals are a valuable method of controlling information, because of the ways in which they limit what can be communicated (Bloch, 1974). At the same time, ritual symbols and practices are notoriously polyvalent (Babcock, 1978; Fernandez, 1965; Stromberg, 1981; Turner, 1967): the popular understanding of their message may not always coincide with what the organizers intend. This is the case with execution rites as with all other rites, as Michel Foucault (1995) has famously observed. An early example of the kind of problem that a public execution might present to New England's ruling regime came in the form of four truculent Quaker missionaries--Marmaduke Stephenson, William Robinson, Mary Dyer, and William Leddra--who continued to spread their doctrine despite legal injunctions and multiple forms of persecution, including whipping, mutilation and banishment. The colony finally solved the problem by hanging them: Stephenson and Robinson in 1659, Dyer in 1660, and Leddra in 1661. While this answered the immediate need, it also gave the Puritans' opponents a set of martyrs and a valuable piece of propaganda that lasted for generations (Pestana, 1993).

As critics of the status quo back in the home county, dissenting clergy could comfortably rail against the Popish affectations of established public ceremony and ritual. As rulers their position was rather more complicated. There were still the good theological reasons to be suspicious of much of that went under the name of ceremony, festival, ritual, games. These were, moreover, all forms of communication that foregrounded the body, which was not where the Puritan's skills and knowledge were on their most confident ground. At the same time, it would have been impossible to establish public authority without some sort of ceremonial life. Public executions, which declared both the ability of the state to punish and its moral authority to do so, were especially important. The need for ceremonies and rituals had to be balanced with a way to control the bodies participating in them. Whether the execution ritual communicated a message of establishment power and moral authority, or a message of despotism and injustice, depended a great deal on how it was handled. It is not surprising that the religious leaders used the same communication technology to police meaning in this as in so many other cases: through the text and the sermon.

**The structure of the sermon:**

As suggested above, the content of the execution sermon varied too much over the course of its nearly two-hundred year career to be able to make reliable generalizations about its style or generic content. Depending on the circumstances and the speaker's own temperament, he might emphasize the fundamentally sinful nature of humankind or the ever-present possibility of redemption, both important elements within Calvinist reformed theology. While quite a number of early sermons, and several later ones, tended toward the jeremiad form, many did not, particularly when the accused lay outside the moral boundaries of the congregation, such as in the executions of slaves or pirates. Some sermons dwelled extensively on the terrors awaiting the unrepentant sinner in hell, but many more mentioned the eternal delights of a heavenly bliss that rewarded the redeemed.

That said, it is possible to trace a kind of rough structure to which many if not all sermons adhered, more closely at the beginning of the period than at its end. To help illustrate this structure, I will use the example of Increase Mather's *The Wicked Man's Portion*, one of the first sermons printed in the colonies, and the product of perhaps the most famous churchman in New England at the time (Mather, 1675). The earliest edition of the work was published in 1675 by the Boston publisher John Foster. Its cover simply displays the title: a frontispiece includes that, as well as identifying the author of the work, and proves a brief explanation of the occasion for its delivery. At the bottom of the page are two short excerpts from Biblical verses: Proverbs 10:27, and Ephesians 6: 2, 3. Neither of these are the verse upon which the sermon is based: they would appear to be simply secondary commentaries on it. Following this is a short four page introduction to the reader, and then begins the sermon itself, headed by a verse from Ecclesiastes: "Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish; why shouldst thou dye (sic) before thy time?" Mather then structures his argument as follows: first, a series of questions examining how one may be said to die before one's time, and a set of answers to that question (Mather, 1675, pp. 2, 3). This moment of biblical explication is then followed by a number of what Mather calls "Uses" of the verse. These uses, Mather tells his audience, are of two kinds: instruction, and exhortation. Concerning the first, the verse instructs us that sin is the greatest folly in the world, that the shortness of days is itself a judgment, and that finally, righteousness is the path to long life (Mather, 1675, pp. 12-14). The exhortations take longer to deliver and explain. Each exhortation is divided into a set of considerations, including the consideration that the prisoner may be in fact a symbol of rebuke for some prevailing evil within the community more generally (Mather, 1675, pp. 15-22). Mather ends with three directions: do what you can that God may have glory by you; look up to God in Jesus Christ; and look up to Eternity.

No other sermon followed this schema precisely, perhaps due to the fact that no other speaker had Mather's analytical mind, which could divide the message into such precise and clearly delineated sections.

Nonetheless, most followed the general pattern of expanding upon and explaining the opening Biblical passage, then attempting to show the audience the relevance of that passage to the specific case at hand. Sometimes, this involved illustrating how the criminal had deviated from the Godly path as illustrated by the verse; sometimes it meant highlighting the fact of God's grace, and its power to effect even the most sinful of human beings. Often, the speaker would end (as Mather in this case did not) with a passage directed specifically to the condemned, urging him or her to repent at last and turn to God, before it was too late. What did link almost all of the sermons together was the way in which speakers located their message within a wider print culture, centered upon but not limited to scripture. Not only were Biblical verses cited, almost obsessively, to support a point—sometimes one verse running upon another upon another—but classical authors such as Plutarch, verses from the Talmud, and even contemporary print sources might be pulled up as secondary proof. Such use of intertextual material did several things. It established the skill of the speaker himself, able not simply to recall this information but to marshal it to support his argument, and thus it established as well his authority to pronounce upon the guilt of the accused, the justice of the penalty, and the semiotic relevance of the shackled prisoner, miserably sitting there in front of the audience. Moreover, it presumed a certain level of literacy and sophistication within the assembled congregation itself. In order to understand the sermon, in order to follow the argument of the clergyman, the audience needed to have a fair amount of Biblical knowledge, and perhaps also other forms of literary expertise. Thus, the sermon operated out of a definite media regime, a set of institutions and skills that circulated legitimated knowledge through the community. And if the message was not received properly (or ignored altogether), it also provided a dramatic illustration of what could happen.

**The sermon as material artifacts:**

Reliably, in its material presentation as well as its content, the execution sermon emphasized the Word (with the various connotations that terms carries in such a culture) over other forms of communication. The visual presentation of the volumes was almost invariably sober, with little in the way of ornamentation. An exemplary title page of a 1740 sermon reads simply, "A SERMON Preach'd December 27, 1740 On Occasion of two Criminals, Namely, Sarah Simpson and Penelope Kenny, And in Hearing of the Former By William Shurtleff, AM Pastor of a Church in Portsmouth, New-Hampshire, To Which is annexed a brief Narrative concerning the said Criminals: And a Preface by the Reverend Mr. Fitch" (Shurtleff, 1740). The title of the sermon itself does not appear until five pages into the volume, and there are almost no visual flourishes, with the exception of a fairly abstract floral design at the head of three different main sections of the work: the preface, the sermon, and the execution narrative. Many earlier examples did not even display this

degree of visual ostentation. There is, admittedly, some development of a more sophisticated presentation later in the century. In the early 1770s, sermons begin appearing with woodcuts of a headstone at the top of the title page: a skull sits in the middle of all of these (nearly identical) images, with two crosses on either side (examples include: Baldwin, 1771; Clark, 1773; Eliot, 1773; Maccarty, 1770; Mather, 1773; Occom, 1774). During the same time period, a set of sermons addressed to the execution of a young thief named Levi Ames displays a woodcut of the lector himself at the pulpit (Stillman, 1773), and several others are decorated with a skull and crossbones (Eliot, 1773; Mather, 1773). At about this time, some publishers also began experimenting with the information on the title page, putting the crime itself in capital or bolder type (Clark, 1773; Fobes, 1785; Maccarty, 1778).

These innovations disappear by the end of the decade, however, and do not return. All told, they were relatively minor changes, especially when seen in relation to other forms of popular literature of the period, which was much more visually developed. This point needs emphasis: it was the *execution sermon specifically*, and not crime literature more generally, that was print-focused. Unsurprisingly, given that they were aimed at a class of people whose purchase on literacy was at best weak, popular pamphlets often used rough wood cuts to help the reader decipher the narrative or song. Tessa Watt notes that in England, these images (generally relating to popular religious figures) would migrate from the printed sources to the walls of houses and inns (Watt, 1991). Printed imagery in the early print culture of Europe also appeared in Reformation propaganda, in early forms of state-sponsored political spectacles, and in the sensationalist journalism of the period (Lardellier, 2005; Park and Daston, 1987; Scribner, 1981; Stephens, 1988). More to point, most other execution and crime literature of the period used woodcuts to illustrate either the execution itself or the commission of the crime that had led to it (see for example: Anonymous, 1732; Anonymous, 1773; Anonymous, 1789; Anonymous, 1800; Lloyd, 1751). The emphatic lack of imagery in the execution sermon must be considered in the context of this alternative form of presentation. The men who delivered these speeches, and who then allowed them to be printed, aimed at something much different than the bravura journalists of the age, who used sex and violence to appeal to the prurient inclinations of a popular audience. To be sure, the sermons were not elite literature. They were not produced or bound in such a manner as to last over time, as were most printed materials aimed at a wealthier audience. Moreover, the preface often emphasized the speaker/writer's goal of avoiding flowery ornate language. (As Increase Mather told his readers, "Plainness in delivering the Truths of God, is always to be endeavoured after" (Mather, 1675, p. ii)). But if the reformers disdained the affected and aristocratic pretensions of the Anglican leadership, they also distrusted the demotic style and overly simplified moral lessons of popular rhetoric and literature (Blench, 1964, p. 112; Watt, 1991, pp. 39, 40). For them, good

communication was made in a sober, straightforward, plain prose style linked to a specific manner of both speech and writing but not, notably, of imagery.

Eventually, of course, New England's religious leadership found itself forced to respond to the growing influence of a popular print culture. The most important figure here may be Increase Mather's son Cotton, one of America's earliest media entrepreneurs (Cohen, 1993, pp. 54-57). Cotton Mather was one of the first people to add a narrative element to the execution sermon. This generally involved placing a separate section into the volume, either as a preface or an addendum following the sermon. The narrative could refer to one of three events: the crime itself (an account of which obviously helped to justify the execution), the execution, in which the behavior of the condemned could provide fodder for additional theological and ethical speculation, and occasionally a final conversation between the criminal and his or her confessor. These additions were obviously in reaction to a burgeoning true crime literature. Accounts of the pirates, highwaymen, murderers, and thieves, their lives and their often dramatic death, their last speeches warning away the youth from the paths they had taken--these appeared in cheap books and broadsides, in newspaper articles, and in ballads, either printed or sung (Gatrell, 1996, pp. 109-196; Linebaugh, 2003, pp. 7-41). Cotton Mather may have thought that by changing the form of the execution sermon, and by producing his own set of true crime stories, entitled *Pillars of Salt*, that he could turn the popular interest in crime to own advantage. But in fact Mather's innovation marked the beginning of the end of the power of his class over the media. The dour execution sermon could not compete with the spectacular visual techniques of the broadside, the true crime narrative, or the journalistic article without sacrificing its distinctiveness as a communication form focused exclusively on the printed and spoken word, a focus that in turn had promoted and legitimated the authority of those who delivered it. Eventually, the New England clergyman would have to cede to the journalist the right to interpret public death in America for a popular media audience.

#### **The execution sermon and ritual performance:**

If popular literature was one of the communication technologies that threatened the power of New England's religious leadership, the ritual execution performance was another. This may seem strange, insofar as rituals traditionally are viewed as forms of communication that support status quo authority, perhaps as the most important of such forms. Certainly it is true that executions affirmed the power of the colonial leadership, both religious and secular, to decide matters of life and death, and also embodied a set of beliefs concerning authority and morality which that leadership controlled. Indeed, a common theme of the sermons was that sinfulness began with acts of rebellion: generally rebellion against parents and

against the church (Danforth, 1674; Mather, 1675; Mather 1687). The execution thus demonstrated the inevitable result of refusal to obey. That said, the Protestant reform tradition had never been as comfortable with the notion of ritual as its orthodox Catholic predecessor. This attitude probably was probably over-determined historically. There was first of all an important philosophical tradition, dating back to Plato, that tended to equate theater and public performance with attempts to manipulate and deceive. There was a tradition of iconoclasm that ran through a good deal of Christian history and may have had its origins in Jewish theological debates. Finally, there was the social and political position of the reformers themselves. Often of a scholarly bent, the early reformers were adept at, and comfortable with, using their textual expertise to attack established sources of power. Often these attacks took the form of calling into question the perverted rituals of the Catholic church, which reformers saw as anachronisms of earlier, less advanced religion at best, and at worst, dishonest attempts to gull the masses with illusion and magic (Calvin, 1965, pp. 17-40; Knox, 1966, pp. 138, 198; Luther, 1957, pp. 129-130; Zwingli, 1987, p. 123). Upon ascending to power, the reformers discovered a much more pragmatic problem with ritual performance. While rituals are supposed to demonstrate both the majesty and the competence of social authority, this message is communicated only if the performance goes as planned, and if the performers conduct themselves appropriately. This does not always happen. In relation to the execution ritual, both the crowd and the condemned are supposed to behave appropriately and in the case of the latter, with appropriate contrition. Very often, theory failed to translate into practice, and it sometimes failed spectacularly.

Let us start with the behavior of the audience. Under the influence of critical theory, whether of a neo-Marxist or poststructuralist bent, historians have been keen to find in the raucous and sometimes dissonant behavior of execution crowds the seeds of a more generalized and profound popular political opposition to established authority. This was a key element of Foucault's work on public punishment, as well as Peter Linebaugh's analysis of the British case: it figures, to some extent, in Pieter Spierenburg's work on executions in Holland (Foucault, 1995; Linebaugh, 1975; Linebaugh, 2003; Spierenburg, 1984). But in fact, execution riots were relatively rare, and when they did occur, were more likely to be directed at specific local figures (often the executioner, accused of mangling the job) than inspired by any sort of more ambitious political critique (Evans, 1996, p. 195). Within the North American case specifically, there does not appear to be any record of execution riots, perhaps because the authorities were often wise enough to grant pardons in the case of politically dicey sentences (Banner, 2002, p. 25; Masur, 1989, p. 45). What does seem to have disturbed contemporary authorities, however, was the often festive or even carnivalesque atmosphere surrounding the executions (Evans, 1996, pp. 193-195, 220; Laqueur, 1989, pp. 305-355). If the point of the public execution was to control the audience through fear, to impress them

with the terrible majesty of the state, then it was difficult to see how this was being accomplished when a boozy crowd of thousands took the event as an opportunity for a kind of holiday, joking and laughing with each other and sometimes the prisoners themselves.

That something of this attitude prevailed among colonial New England crowds can be seen through comments in the sermons themselves. An early sermon dealing with the case of a murderer named James Morgan, contains a short narrative of his trip to the gallows, accompanied by a clergyman. At one point Morgan slips and falls, and notes in misery the hard-heartedness of some in the crowd who are now mocking and scoffing at him. Morgan adds that he had exhibited similar kinds of behavior himself on previous occasions (Mather, 1687, p. 121). In response to such behavior, some later sermons would end with an admonition to those assembled, to observe the occasion with due respect and solemnity:

The melancholy spectacle which is soon to be exhibited, hath drawn together a vast concourse of people, who are doubtlessly influenced by various motives to be spectators of so awful a scene. Some by true seriousness, and many to gratify a vain curiosity. Curiosity is but a poor motive for collecting on such an occasion--the person who can go and look on death, merely to gratify an idle humour, is destitute both of humanity and piety. Such awful exhibitions are designed that others may see and fear.-- Go not to that place of horror with elevated spirits, and gay hearts, for death is there! justice and judgment are there! the power of government, displayed in its most awful form, is there (Strong, 1777, p. 17).

As a form of social management, ritual instructs through controlling the body, and the most effective users of ritual are those who can control the body to behave in the way it is supposed to behave: thus the need for highly conventionalized behavior in most ritual performance. For various reasons, the Puritan leaders often found themselves suspicious of the bodies that congregated on the grounds of the gallows, and therefore tried to exert control through a set of media--the text and the sermon--with which they were far more comfortable, but which were generally more effective at influencing the mind.

A more dramatic problem confronted authorities in the matter of the condemned prisoners themselves. In order for the execution to send the sort of message that it was supposed to send, the message that the sermon had primed the audience to expect, a certain kind of performance was required of the prisoner: either a kind of resigned stoicism, or obvious terror, which would impress the onlookers either through admiration or fear, respectively. Above all, there needed to be a clear and unambiguous acknowledgement of guilt and of the prisoner's own affirmation of the justice of the sentence of death that had been passed down. Very often, those about to die would use their moment on the scaffold to deliver a warning to the audience about the wages of sin and the path of unrighteousness which had led them to this sorry state. These last warnings were themselves a kind of rhetorical genre, with a list of common transgressions--drinking, prostitution (either as a profession or as a customer), swearing, habitual absence from Sunday

services, and general disobedience. They often served as a kind of populist recapitulation of the argument that the minister had made in the execution sermon proper.

Prisoners often, but not always, performed their expected roles. Deviations might include a refusal to accept guilt, an overly proud or arrogant attitude, especially shown toward clergy themselves, and the reappearance of certain personal qualities, such as a quickness to anger or a fondness for drink, that may have led to the capital crime. Sometimes, the unruliness of the body on the gallows extended even beyond this, and required further action on the part of the textual class. Bryan Sheehan, a former soldier convicted of raping a Massachusetts woman in 1772, had publicly declared himself innocent of the charges leveled against him, both before and after the trial and up to the event of the sermon. He had indeed been living in sin with Abial Hollowell, the presumed victim, Sheehan conceded, but maintained that the sexual relations between them had been consensual. Sheehan admitted he was guilty of adultery, but not rape (Diman, 1772, p. 17). What is more, according to an addendum to the sermon, it was clear that his claims found some traction within local opinion. His denial had "induced many to entertain hard thoughts of the woman [Hollowell], and to think more favorably of him: And many have said he ought not to have been hanged" (Diman, 1772, p. 23). Then there was the problem of Sheehan's religion. Born in Ireland and raised a Catholic, he was suspected of remaining loyal to Popery to the end, despite pretending to have renounced the errors of the church at Rome. "This appears from testimony of an intimate friend of his, of the same religion; who was with him in goal, and attended him at the gallows" (Diman, 1772, pp. 23, 24).

Bryan Sheehan did not display open contempt for church and state as such. His challenge to the legal system was only that it erred in this particular case (the miscarriage of justice he laid at the feet of the victim and other witnesses, not the Judge or jury). His religious opposition, too, was localized. He seemed to concede the importance of clergy: only, not *New England's* clergy. Thus the need to neutralize him. The minister, James Diman, used the sermon to frame Sheehan as an outsider, a threat to the community and an unrepentant sinner, symbolic not of the human condition but of simple evil.

Again, let it be considered that it appears evidently from Scripture, that God is sometimes provoked to give heinous sinners up to blindness of mind and hardness of heart---to leave them to the power of their lusts and of the devil. When they commence evils---contract the temper of the infernal spirits before they leave the world, and to go to that place of punishment which is prepared for the devil and his agents. And when men are thus blinded and hardened, the motives and arguments of religion, have little or no Influence on them (Diman, 1772, p. 24).

In this effort to demonize the accused, his Roman Catholic beliefs and dissimulations obviously could be turned to advantage: "Now we know one tenet of the church of Rome is, that they are not obliged, in some cases, to perform their most solemn vows to Hereticks; and he [Sheehan] might possibly think that if he

might swear falsely, he doubtless could speak falsely to Hereticks, as they call all whose religious principles differ from theirs" (Diman, 1772, p. 24) The question of Sheehen's criminal guilt was dealt with by heresay evidence. The writer of the addendum (there is some suggestion in the text that it was Diman, although this is not entirely clear) noted that he had been approached by "credible persons" informing him of the case of rape and murder of a young girl in another town, Gouldsborough (conveniently located some distance from Salem) the perpetrator of which was said to be none other than Sheehen. As to why Sheehen was not thereby arrested and charged with the crime, the text was unclear; it noted merely that Sheehen had left the town. "Now if [Sheehen] was the man, and I think there is the highest probability that he was; there can be no doubt of his guilt with respect to Mrs. Hollowell. And as I hope there are not many such monsters upon the earth, so I think it a favor that the earth is rid of him" (Diman, 1772, p. 24) The text thus dealt with the threat of Bryan Sheehan by turning him into a lying Papist and vile murderer. The morally complicated figure of the penitent sinner was replaced by an easy-to-digest stereotype.

Even more outrageous than Sheehan's attitudes was the behavior shown by several pirates at the beginning of century. These pirates, like Sheehan, did not come from within the community; their allegiances and morals so differed from the New England colonials, and their ties to the land so slight, that they did not feel any moral pressure to conform to the expectations others had of them. Thus men such as John Quelch or John Brown often produced openly defiant messages for the audience. On the scaffold, Brown "broke out into furious Expressions, which had in them too much of the *Language* he had been used unto. Then he fell to Reading of prayers, not very pertinently chosen. At length he made a *Short Speech*, which everybody trembled at; Advising Sailors, to beware of all wicked Living, such as his own had been; especially to beware of falling into the Hands of *Pirates*: But if they did, are were forced to join with them, then, *to have care whom they killed* [?], *and whom they let go, and what Countries they came into*" (Mather, 1717, p. 38) Even Brown's stubbornness, however, paled in comparison to the astounding behavior of William Fly, executed in Boston with several members of his crew in 1724. Fly was a rather incompetent pirate but a much more impressive condemned man. He refused to attend the execution sermon, rode to the gallows with a nosegay in his hand, conversed with onlookers, and warned ships captains' not to treat their men poorly when it came time for him to hang. He was such a problem that Cotton Mather and another clergyman, Samuel Colman, were forced to do a great deal of additional work in their subsequent accounts of the event to make him seem especially stupid and arrogant (Williams, 1987). Again, the recourse to the text allowed the clergy to reframe the potentially threatening message of open rebellion that the bodily performed communicated. Whether eighteenth-century audiences were more convinced by the furious prose of Cotton Mather or the bravura style of William Fly is difficult to say.

**Summary:**

A public execution is a moment of high tension not only at the level of the individual body but at the level of the social body as well. It is a forceful demonstration of the power of the ruling authority, its ability to make decisions concerning the fundamental question of who dies and who lives. The power communicated through the ritual of the public execution is the power of the ruling class to determine the limits of appropriate behavior, and to inflict upon those bodies which would presume to challenge those limits the ultimate sanction. Through the infliction of pain and a gruesome and ignoble death, authority transmits a terrifying message to the assembled crowd, one intended to protect it from challenges, to intimidate rebels present at the event, and to present a moral justification at the same time, so that the ritual is not seen simply as an exercise in brute force. It operates through both consent and coercion.

But how are we to think about this ruling class, and its power? Previous work on the execution sermon has tended to see in Puritan clergy representations of dominant social groups as viewed through the lens of class, or institutional religion, or gender. What I have proposed here is to think of them in relation to what Harold Innis once called their "monopoly of knowledge," but which I propose to rename simply the *communicative regime* which they controlled. Such regimes include a set of preferred technologies, control over the dissemination of information, and a moral hierarchy of what makes for good communication. In the case of the regime in Puritan New England, all legitimate communication sprang from the Text. The Bible was, or ought to be, at the center of life. It was the mediation between God and Man. But this text was in no way a simple message. It required the skills of a set of elite hermeneutists to interpret and explain the meaning to the rest of the community. This they did through the production of their own texts, and in the oral form of the sermon. Inevitably, such an elite refashioned the execution ritual to suit their needs. Before participants could embody the execution ritual they required textual preparation. The community of New England's religious leadership used execution sermons to construct and enforce a set of carefully proscribed meanings to public executions, calling on their textual powers to protect the message that these rituals were intended to communicate. By that term, "textual power," I refer not only to the set of skills that clergymen possessed, skills which allowed them to manipulate the public discourse in a manner most suited to their ethos and their power, but also their ability to exert a sort of rough control over which texts reached the population. Before the turn of the eighteenth century, the only kinds of execution texts produced in New England were the sermons themselves. The monopoly of knowledge allowed the clergy to create a virtually unchallenged social semiotics of the condemned prisoner.

As Cotton Mather put it at the beginning of one of his sermons, "We have before us, a very miserable, but we cannot excuse the hardness of our own hearts, if it not be also a very profitable spectacle" (Mather, 1690, p. 1) The interpretation of what the prisoner was supposed to communicate to the community was of

course dependent on the power of the textual class that provided it. It was the clergy that instructed the prisoner in the appropriate responses to make to the catechism of the execution: the proper answers to questions of guilt and the justice of the sentence, the correct understandings of God's grace, and the possibilities of salvation. The execution sermon was therefore not simply the articulation of a set of moral and theological precepts and instructions to the congregation. It also served a meta-communicative function, enacting through its very performance the need for texts to control bodies, to force them into submission. Unsurprisingly, the sins of the criminal on the gallows often began with sins against the text: the dismissal of Biblical truths, the refusal to attend Sunday's sermons.

This regime was threatened by two competing forms of communication. The first was the ritual performance itself, and the wayward behavior of both audience and criminal. The former often failed to attend the ritual in the proper manner, and with the appropriate intent. Rather than reacting with respect and authority before the terror of authority, colonial New Englanders too often displayed mere curiosity or even worse, merriment and laughter. As for the prisoners on the gallows, they too often used the opportunity to publicly challenge authority, rather than submit to it. The saving grace of such messages, from the viewpoint of the religion elite, was that bodily performances, if they are to travel, to have any influence beyond their immediate event, require texts to transmit them, and the clergy controlled the texts. Thus they were able to frame the defiance of men like Fly and Brown in a manner to their liking.

The more important challenge came not from ritualized bodies, but from a much different kind of text. Over the course of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, the execution sermon gave way increasingly to popular texts like the true crime account and the newspaper report. This does not mean that New Englanders were left without any socially sanctioned interpretations of state-sponsored death. Nineteenth century crime texts and newspaper accounts display a good deal of moralizing rhetoric. Only, the morality had changed, along with the textual class that produced it. This was a class whose ultimate appeal was to the market, and not to God. It provided a much different understanding of state-sponsored death than that of the colonial Puritan, although it is hard to argue that it is, in the end, any more of a democratic or humane one.

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<sup>1</sup> The criterion for inclusion into the universe of primary documents for this study was that a volume be listed explicitly as an "execution sermon" in either the First or Second series of the Early American Imprints, the most extensive archive of early American print culture available. In cases for which a volume had multiple printings, the first printing was generally selected for analysis. The exception to this is the Alden sermon, which was found in the collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia.