I

Introductory: figures of prejudice

In 1637, the year in which the Puritans banished Anne Hutchinson for her "mishapen opinions" on religion, the Puritans also initiated a genocidal war against the Pequots, a tribe of Native Americans who inhabited parts of southern and central New England. John Underhill, leader of the Massachusetts Bay Company militia in the war, published a narrative in 1638 revealing the full extent of Puritan violence against the Pequots. The first major battle occurred near what is now Mystic, Connecticut, in the spring of 1637, several months before Hutchinson's state trial. The Puritans surrounded the virtually defenseless Pequots and slaughtered everyone in the settlement, including women and children, by setting it on fire. John Mason, leader of the Hartford militia, "set fire on the west side," Underhill recounted, and "myself set fire on the south end with a train of powder." The human conflagration that ensued was horrific:

> The fires of both meeting in the center of the fort, blazed most terribly, and burnt all in the space of half an hour. . . . Many were burnt in the fort, both men, women, and children. . . . Great and doleful was the bloody sight to the view of young soldiers that had never been in war, to see so many souls lie gasping on the ground, so thick, in some places, that you could hardly pass along.

Those who attempted to escape the flames were shot or stabbed to death. After a second major battle in a swamp near New Haven, the Puritans had succeeded in their intent to destroy the Pequot People, as Mason said, "to cut off the Remembrance of them from the Earth."[1] When we include the historical fact of the mass killing at Mystic in our perception of who the Puritans were, it raises issues of interpretation that are otherwise obscured in intellectual history.[2] Although the Pequot War was by far the most extreme act of prejudice the early Puritans committed, the social values that inspired it were intrinsic to

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Puritan culture. Consequently, to isolate the social fact of catastrophic
violence as a lapse of cultural beliefs is to fail to understand its relation-
ship to other, nonviolent acts of prejudice characterizing Puritanism.
The genocidal war against the Pequots occurred at the same time as the
Hutchinson controversy, and although the religious controversy never
became a violent confrontation, there were threats and fears of violence
on both sides.[3] When we take into account the rhetoric of threat, the
distinction between violent and nonviolent acts is more difficult to
draw than it first appears. It is equally difficult to distinguish between
religious and secular events. Although the Pequot War may seem to
have been solely a military campaign – as opposed to the religious dis-
putes of the controversy within the Puritan colony – the war, like the
controversy, was perceived as an attack on the enemies of Puritan reli-
gion. Captain Mason, for example, attributed the war of extermination
to "the LORD GOD" who "was pleased to smite our Enemies in the
hinder parts" and "redeem us out of our Enemies Hands."[4] The simul-
taneity of the war and the religious controversy also suggests that the
prejudices of race and gender were linked, but the relationship is a
complicated one. To distinguish the war as an act of racial hatred and
the banishment of Hutchinson as an expression of prejudice against
women oversimplifies events, for the Pequot women at Mystic were
the objects of both kinds of prejudice.

Both the war and the controversy demonstrate that prejudice was
rationalized by religion in Puritan society, that to a great extent prejudi-
cial and religious beliefs were indistinguishable. The most obvious
kinds of evidence are the pronouncements of men such as Mason, who
readily cited Scripture and wrapped their own motives in the intentions
of their deity. Although this level of rationalization was important, it
was in many respects only the outcome of a more profound synthesis of
religion and prejudice in the perception of material shapes. As we will
see, the Puritan belief in the necessity and righteousness of deliberate
physical harm was deeply indebted to the ideology of Protestant icono-
clasm in Reformation Europe. The violent destruction of artistic images
of people developed into a mandate for sacrosanct violence against hu-
man beings, especially against people whose material "image," whose
physical characteristics, differed from the Puritan man's own. The asso-
ciation between prejudice and the violence of iconoclasm was strength-
ened by seventeenth-century concepts of prejudice. For the Puritans and
their contemporaries, the word "prejudice" could mean an act of mate-
rial injury as well as negative prejudgment.[5] For example, Underhill
wrote of the Puritans' decision to set fire to the fort at Mystic, "We
devised a way how we might save ourselves and prejudice them."
Concluding that "we had sufficient light from the word of God for our

proceedings," Underhill insinuated that religious violence and prejudi-
cial acts of material harm were inseparable: Prejudice was violent and
this violence was holy.[6] The synthesis was further enhanced by another
seventeenth-century meaning of prejudice, prognostication. For ex-
ample, when the minister John Cotton condemned Hutchinson for
heresy, he also predicted that she would become an adulteress. Lack of
faith in religion, he warned, would lead to unfaithfulness in marriage.
However pious she seemed, it would be revealed that her beliefs were
actually those of a sexual libertine who advocated "all promiscuus and
filthie cominge togeather of men and Woemen without Distinction or
Relation of Marriage."[7] In the Pequot War and the Hutchinson contro-
versy, Puritan leaders overtly sanctioned their own acts of violence and
the slanders of prognostication, making prejudice indistinguishable
from their religious beliefs.

   The threats and acts of physical harm, the symbolism of physical
identity, and the rationale of iconoclastic violence against people as
images–all these aspects of prejudice were informed by a concept of
figuration that was qualitatively different from what we usually take
"figurative" to mean in literary thought. Puritanism relied on the classi-
cal concept of *figura,* an idea that initially had nothing to do with lan-
guage. In its earliest usage *figura* meant a dynamic material shape, and
often a living corporeal shape such as the figure of a face or a human
body.[8] This ancient concept of figuration has a modern equivalent in our
sense of the human bodily form or appearance as a "figure." For the
Puritans, the concept of *figura* was a means of interpreting the human
shape, whether as artistic image or as living form, and it comprehended
both nonviolent and violent interpretations of human beings. Among its
most important qualities, the classical concept of *figura* as it meant mate-
rial shape defied the conventional metaphoric opposition between "figu-
rative" and "literal." The configuration or shape was simply there, and
its defining property was the dynamic materiality of its form. A modern
example from abstract art that employs this concept is a mobile: The
motion of material shapes continually reconstitutes different figures (or
figurae) without ever producing a shape that one would distinguish from
the others as distinctly literal in opposition to figurative.

   In Latin culture *figura* acquired a protean variety of meanings, devel-
oping into a theory of figuration that included language and the figures
of rhetoric but was by no means restricted to discourse. As Erich Auer-
bach has shown, *figura* was variously used to mean statue, image, por-
trait, model, copy, dream image, simulacrum, figment, style, imprint
of a seal, geometric form, architectural plan, rhetorical figures, occupa-
tion, the acoustic images of speech, and more.[9] Some of these meanings
carried the connotation of figurative, fictive, or representational, but

the range of meanings that accrued to *figura* was much broader. In early modern Europe the revival of classical learning recovered the complexity and richness of the Latin theory of figuration, a complexity that was owing in part to the kaleidoscopic variety of ways to conceive of the relation between words and referents. Because this theory of figuration did not privilege language, and because *figura* disregarded the conceptual boundaries of "sign" and "referent" that we associate with discourse, the possible combinations of words and things was immense. Although the full range of classical and renaissance meanings of *figura* is relevant to Puritanism, this study is primarily concerned with the concepts of material form that proved to be most important to the American colonists' words and acts of prejudice: the shapes of speech, icons, and the shapes of people.

As the seventeenth-century ideas of prejudice and figuration suggest, linguistic beliefs and values are culturally variable. That is, societies do not necessarily share the same theory of figuration or even grant the same social significance to language. Dell Hymes has observed, "Peoples do not all everywhere use language to the same degree, in the same situations, or for the same things." Consequently, "languages, like other cultural traits, will be found to vary in the degree and nature of their integration into the societies and cultures in which they occur."[10] To explore the social dimensions of language use and its relation to prejudicial violence, we need to understand how, and to what extent, language use contributed to the ways in which Puritan society produced its own sense of social conditions. Exhortations to commit violence were rarely so forthright as they were in the Pequot War, and in general the most exacting social prejudices were not usually conveyed in overt statements. Puritans often sanctioned prejudicial acts obliquely through the representation of violence in figurative language, and by indirectly cultivating an attitude toward material shapes that granted considerable semantic value to material forms. Similarly, Puritan beliefs about social roles and the institution of marriage were preached far more often through the imagery of theological beliefs than by literal statements of doctrine. Though this rhetoric has often been analyzed for its theological content, it has rarely been considered as a means of inculcating social values. As we will see, understanding the persuasiveness of the Puritans' rhetoric from this perspective does not disregard the religious content of their discourse but rather accounts for it in a different way.[11]

As a means of inquiry, I have focused primarily on the works of John Cotton in the period 1620–40, when English Puritans first immigrated to America and Puritan men established their hegemony in Massachusetts Bay. Throughout his life, Cotton gave no evidence of ever having cared whether posterity heard of him or not, and posterity by and large has

deferred to his indifference. He is probably best known now (where he is
known at all) as Anne Hutchinson's minister, but among his contempo-
raries he was most respected for his skill in rhetoric, his fidelity to the
Puritan cause, and his learning in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Cotton was
in most respects typical of an Anglo-American Puritan leader. Born in
1584 in Derbyshire, he began his career as dean and catechist of Emman-
uel College, Cambridge, in the first decade of the seventeenth century. In
1612, already a noted orator at the university, he left Cambridge to
become vicar of the largest parish church in England, St. Botolph's, in
the international port city of Boston, Lincolnshire. Here he was married
for the first time, to Elizabeth Horrocks. During his years at St. Bo-
tolph's, Cotton became widely known for his success as a rhetorician in
the pulpit and for his Puritan refusal to perform the rituals of the Church
of England. He also appears to have maintained a close association with
Emmanuel College, since students came from Cambridge, and even-
tually from the Continent as well, to study with him in Boston. In 1632
he was threatened with prosecution by Archbishop Laud, and like many
other Puritans he went into hiding in London. Cotton's first wife died of
illness in 1630, and he was married again in 1632 to Sarah Hawkridge
Story (with whom he had five children). After nearly a year in London,
Cotton emigrated in 1633 to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, where he
became teacher of the First Church of Boston and enjoyed immediate
success as a preacher. Within a few years he had become involved in the
disputes of the Hutchinson controversy, but despite the crisis, he con-
tinued to hold authority in the church and the colony.[12] In the 1640s he
was the leading apologist for American Congregationalism, and by the
time of his death in 1652 he had become one of the most influential
Puritan ministers of the seventeenth century, well known on both sides
of the Atlantic.[13]

   Cotton was a more sophisticated rhetorician than scholars have taken
him to be, but it is not my purpose to assess Cotton himself, or, for
that matter, to rescue him from obscurity. In the chapters that follow,
the topics I emphasize in Cotton's works and the analytical issues I raise
have been selected with a view to their importance for understanding
the development of prejudice in early America. Rather than render a
biography, either intellectual or historical, I have considered Cotton as
an anthropologist might treat an articulate native informant who was
directly involved in major events. My purpose is less to understand him
as a particular individual than to understand the linguistic and social
values that characterized his rhetoric as a member of the Puritan elite.
Since the history of iconoclasm, the history of the Pequot War, and the
antinomian controversy bear directly on his use of figures, I have also
treated these subjects at length.

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The referential imperative

The use of religion to promulgate social values and rationalize acts of
prejudice is relatively obvious in the trial of Anne Hutchinson and the
Pequot War, but the same attitude was no less present, and no less
important, in the Puritan rhetoric of conversion. Despite their appear-
ance of otherworldly concerns in preaching the soul's salvation, minis-
ters such as John Cotton subordinated belief in the deity to another end:
communicating the absolute rightness of their own social ideals. The
figures of rhetoric, apart from any scriptural doctrine of an elect nation,
were their most important means of persuasion. Figures like the secular
imagery of metaphor seem at first glance to be minor, even unrelated to
the aims of conversion, but their obliqueness is misleading. As we will
see, the social ideas expressed within the figures of rhetoric were the
primary exhortations of the sermon. This is not to say that engendering
belief in the deity was wholly a fraudulent enterprise, a mere stalking-
horse for cultural elitism, for the spiritual pantheon was integral to the
Puritan system of social meaning. The act of belief in the deity created
contradictions that were intrinsic to articulating and sustaining the
prejudicial values of their culture.

Gauging the social import of rhetorical figures in sermons quickly
leads to a complex array of considerations about language use. Meta-
phors, for example, can be interpreted in many ways, and the social
values assigned to them can vary substantially from one situation to
another. What makes one metaphor didactic, another a casual observa-
tion, and another a patently fictive image? The ways in which meta-
phors interact with other aspects of language use, and cultural assump-
tions about the power of words in relation to referents, affect the
meaning assigned to a particular figure.[1] The social significance of
imagery, or any other kind of rhetorical figure, depends on a culture's
ideas about language use. In their most general assumptions about

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language, the Puritans placed considerable emphasis on the power of
words to influence an individual's perception of social conditions. This
assumption is evident in their self-consciousness about the experience
of salvation as essentially a linguistic event. John Cotton, taking
Peter's sermon at Pentecost as a paradigm of conversion, describes it
as a nearly miraculous transformation of the crowd in response to
Peter's words:

> These men at first, did not a little wonder to heare the Apostles speake
> with strange Tongues, [Acts 2] ver. 12. and mee thinks it is as great a
> wonder to see this sudden change (by a word speaking:) See in them,
> what a new tongue, a pricked heart will worke. The same men that
> even now said, the Apostles were full of the spirit of Wine; now they
> speake the language of Canaan: before debaucht Ruffians; now, *Men
> and Brethren;* A work, they had not been wonted to: they that before
> mocked at new Tongues, had now themselves gotten new Tongues;
> and it was a greater miracle to have such words in their mouths, then
> to heare the Apostles speake all the principall Languages in the world.[2]

Not only did speech generate conversion. The hearer's religious experi-
ence was itself a linguistic event. "To have such words in their mouths"
was to be converted, to undergo the ultimate transformation their reli-
gion promised. The phrase "the language of Canaan" is a metaphor
suggesting the nature of this transformation. Those converted by hear-
ing Peter's sermon acquired "new Tongues," but they did not actually
speak a new language. Rather, the "language of Canaan" designates a
particular way of using one's own native language, of learning to use
the same words differently.

To put it another way, conversion was an alteration of the hearer's
system of reference in response to the preacher's words, a conversion
from one system of meaning to another. The Puritan insistence on the
need for conversion, and on sermons as the means of it, evinced an
awareness that literal meaning is variable. We often assume that literal
meaning has stability, but systems of reference are socially variable,
even within one culture. What is literal to one person is not necessarily
literal to another, and different circumstances may invoke differences in
literal meaning from the same individual. Puritans depended on the
circumstances of preaching to change the hearer's system of reference
and thereby alter the hearer's perception and understanding of social
behavior. One might suppose that sermons directly engaged issues of
social behavior and that converts were obligated to change their social
actions, not just their perception of them. However, Cotton's paradigm
is representative of how little Puritans' doctrines concerned social con-
duct, at least in their sermons on the conversion of the soul. Puritan

preachers sought mainly to produce converts who would speak differently because they had come to think differently about the meanings of words and things.

Cotton describes conversion not just as a verbal experience but particularly as an experience of speech: Conversion occurs "by a word speaking." Puritans generally believed that only spoken words, and spontaneous speech at that, could produce conversions. Well known for their staunch opposition to the Anglican practice of writing out sermons and reading them, Puritan preachers themselves spoke extemporaneously or from brief notes, relying quite specifically on speech, not just words, to effect the transformation of conversion. It might seem that Puritan linguistic values granted an absolute privilege to the written word, since their sermons were purportedly explications of biblical texts, and their written notes appear to provide the substance of explication in listing "doctrines," "reasons," and "uses." Michel Foucault implies as much in arguing that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century world view "presupposes an absolute privilege on the part of writing." He concludes, "Henceforth it is the primal nature of language to be written. The sounds made by voices provide no more than a transitory and precarious translation of it."[3] However, the crucial importance of speaking in conversion shows that Puritans believed written texts were in some way fundamentally dependent for their intelligibility on their incorporation into speech, that sound – however transitory and precarious – was essential.

The importance of speech in the Puritans' culture requires us to recast our ideas about the value they assigned to rhetorical figures in sermons. Figures seem at first to be unimportant because preachers rarely made notes about imagery, simply leaving rhetorical figuration to extemporaneous composition in the pulpit. Such a practice would appear to lend itself to the conventional assumption that rhetorical figures are mere embellishment, something added to the substance of what is being said lexically. However, what was composed spontaneously was the most valued, not the least valued, aspect of language. Puritans believed that when a preacher spoke in the pulpit, he spoke from the inspiration of the deity. Thus the figures of rhetoric were the dimension of language most directly attributed to divine inspiration, and consequently the most authoritative aspect of discourse.

Believing in the need to hear words in order to be converted gives an unusual prominence to material signifiers, to the acoustic shapes of spoken words. This emphasis may seem strange because we are not used to thinking about sound as an important determinant of meaning, and we tend to equate serious figuration with metaphor. The Puritans acknowledged the importance of metaphor, to be sure, but their idea of

rhetorical figuration was far more expansive, encompassing a variety of tropes and figures of speech that are unfamiliar to a modern reader. The most important among these are the rhetorical figures of acoustic design.[4] Perhaps because Puritan rhetoric was indebted to classical rhetoricians whose model was the orator, the Puritans were acutely sensitive to the patterns of sound in speech and the capacity of these figures to affect meaning, including the meaning of metaphors.

When Cotton undertakes an explicit defense of rhetorical figures in general, he focuses his defense on verbal schemes, the patterns of actual sounds that are heard when the words are pronounced. Attacking the idea that the plain style either can or should be devoid of figures, he describes how the topic of vanity is "amplified by many ornaments of rhetoric" in Eccles. 1.2, "*Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher: vanity of vanities, all is vanity*."[5] He enumerates eleven different rhetorical figures in Solomon's words: the trope hyperbole and then ten figures of speech involving rhythm and the repetition of letters, syllables, and words. His catalogue of verbal schemes leaves no syllable unturned: the same sound continued in a sentence; the sound at the end of one sentence repeated at the beginning of the next; the same sound employed at the beginning and end of a sentence; the same sound repeated at the beginnings of sentences; the same sound repeated at the ends of sentences; interlaced repetition of sounds at the beginning and middle, and the middle and end of sentences; sentences with the same number of syllables; the same sound continued and increased by degrees through the verse; the repetition of sounds that are similar but not quite the same (E5–6). The rhetoric is so woven with verbal patterns that it is wholly figural, implying a continuous relation between sound and meaning.[6]

Cotton's theory of rhetoric does not separate discourse into figurative and nonfigurative usage. Because the figures of acoustic design are inextricable from the material fact of speech, all language use is figurative in some way. This idea was a common one in classical rhetoric, and Cotton himself probably drew directly on Quintilian, who uses *figura* in this sense in the *Institutio Oratoria* to introduce his theory of rhetorical figuration:

> The first point for consideration is, therefore, what is meant by a *figure* [*figuram*]. For the term is used in two senses. In the first it is applied to any form in which thought is expressed, just as it is to bodies which, whatever their composition, must have some shape. In the second and special sense, in which it is called a *schema,* it means a rational change in meaning or language from the ordinary and simple form, that is to say, a change analogous to that involved by sitting, lying down on something or looking back.[7]

Since the shapes of words, or any combination of them, or any parts of them, are *figurae,* to use language is to compose in figures. Asking a rhetorician to avoid using figures is like asking a musician to avoid playing notes, for material shapes are an intrinsic, inescapable feature of speech. Even in speech devoid of the obvious adornment of metaphor and image, there will always be the audible shapes of syllables. Quintilian's second and more restricted usage of *figura* refers to verbal schemes such as Cotton enumerates.[8] He uses the analogy of bodily positions to explain how the schemes relate to his more general concept of figuration: Particular motions of the human body give it a different shape without changing the fundamental shape of the body itself. He mentions that some rhetoricians call rhetorical figures "motions" and that he himself thinks of schemes as "certain attitudes" or "gestures" of language.[9] Though verbal schemes are easily recognized as figurative discourse, Quintilian also concludes that "in the first and common sense of the word [*figura*] there is nothing that is not figural [*nihil non figuratum est*]."[10] That is, all discourse is figural, whether it is schematic or not, and Quintilian means this materially, concretely, in the sense of the dynamic material shapes of speech. Whether *figurae* are just inevitably there or put there in the more conscious and purposeful designs of a practiced orator, the material shapes of language make all speech a figuration.

Hyperbole, the one trope Cotton lists among the "ornaments" of Solomon's words, describes the general effect of figures of sound. The "reasons of the Repetition of this vanity; and the Holy Ghosts manner of speech," he explains, are "to shew the excessiveness of the vanity" (E7). Cotton's sense of hyperbole as a sustained alteration of meaning follows Quintilian's view that tropes can be understood as "modes." Modes alter meaning substantially, for "the changes involved concern not merely individual words, but also our thought and the structure of our sentences."[11] As a mode rather than a particular instance of a figure, a trope is a generic term for a quality of sustained alteration. It indicates the effect of using a variety of figures in a certain way, rather like composing in a particular key in music. The hyperbolic mode can incorporate a wide array of tropes and figures, all geared toward the expression of augmentation or diminution, or both.[12] For example, Solomon exaggerates his diminution of the value of "earthly things" by his hyperbolic exclamation that "all is vanity." Hyperbole does not define, name, or classify. It amplifies, diminishes, augments, emphasizes, enhances, understates, attenuates.[13] More than any other trope, it lends itself to the idea of figures as gestures, and it gestures most persuasively, Cotton argues, through the designs of sound, the patterned arrangement of acoustic shapes.