1.

50% Cotton

Authorship, Authority, and the Atlantic

“I never said half the things I said.”

—YOGI BERRA, ATTRIB.

I: The Cotton-Williams Debate?

The first dissident errand from New England to London was Roger Williams’s 1643–44 trip to London. Roger Williams began and ended his this trip by publishing works concerning Indians. However, A Key into the Language of America (1643) and Christenings Make Not Christians (1645) bracket a more extensive body of work concerned with English affairs. Of these texts, the Bloudy Tenent of Persecution (1644) is the most prominent. The Bloudy Tenent, along with Mister Cotton’s Letter Lately Printed Examined and Answered (1644), are Roger Williams’s early salvos in what scholars call the Cotton–Williams debate.

This debate is one of the chestnuts of seventeenth-century American studies. Excerpts from the texts forming the debate are a staple of anthologies covering early America, and interpretations of the debate serve as a principal point of contention between Perry Miller’s and Sacvan Bercovich’s readings of American Puritanism. In more recent scholarship, the Cotton–Williams debate remains a focus for scholars concerned with questions of toleration and the relation of church and state in seventeenth-century Puritanism.

However, the important issues Cotton and Williams air in this debate
can distract readers from its peculiar form. The phrase “Cotton–Williams debate” suggests a figurative, if not literal, discursive field where the protagonists encounter one another and conduct this exchange of ideas. However, this presumption distorts the nature of this debate. It is a debate in that Cotton and Williams disagree, but is not a debate in the sense that its texts are the artifact of an encounter, or even a series of texts simulating an encounter in print. In *The Origins of Democratic Culture*, David Zaret identifies the “imposition of dialogic order on conflict” as a key element in the development of public opinion, which in turn is a constitutive element of the political public sphere [that] first appeared in the English Revolution. According to Zaret, this imposition is a “consequence of increased ability swiftly and massively to reproduce texts.” This facility, in turn, led ideological antagonists to the “simultaneous constitution and invocation of public opinion.”

Print imposes the appearance of a “dialogic order” on the texts of the debate, but attention to the material contexts of the Cotton–Williams debate reveals that it was a radically asymmetric conflict. Williams used his presence in the metropolis to provoke the debate and dictate its terms, while Cotton struggled to reply in a meaningful or timely way from the shores of Massachusetts. The difference between the two men’s access to print shaped the form of the debate, which in turn influenced its content. More generally, attention to the physical form of this debate reveals how little control the most influential theologian in New England had over the words that appeared in his name. This lack of authorial control is the rule, rather than the exception, for Cotton, and it is a challenge Cotton’s brethren faced as well.

This asymmetry is a consistent and critical feature of the printed debates between colonists published in metropolitan London. The reason for this imbalance lies in the same tension between the two senses of the word “errand” that animates Perry Miller’s “Errand into the Wilderness.” Miller seizes on the difference between an errand one performs for another, and an errand one performs for oneself. “Originally, as the word first took form in English, it meant exclusively a journey on which an inferior is sent to convey a message or perform a service for his superior . . . . But by the end of the Middle Ages, errand developed another connotation: it came to mean the actual business on which the actor goes, the purpose itself.” For an aspiring author resident in New England during the first decades of settlement, publishing involved one or the other of these senses of errand. Colonial authors could travel to London to publish on their
own behalf, or they could entrust their manuscripts to others. There was, of course, a colonial press after 1639, but it was neither used much nor of much use in contexts like the Cotton–Williams debate. Winning the hearts and minds of London readers was not an office of the provincial press. Thanks to nationalist and antiquarian traditions in bibliography, scholars of early America are familiar with the Freeman’s Oath and the Bay Psalm Book as the first works to issue from New England presses. But these books are prominent precisely because of they are anomalous American imprints—throughout the seventeenth century, London imprints dominated the shelves of New Englanders, and carried the vast majority of the printed discourse about New England read on both sides of the Atlantic.

The digital edition of the Evans catalog of American imprints lists forty-two imprints for the years 1630 to 1660. Early English Books Online, the digital successor to such bibliographies as Wing and Pollard, lists 39,882 items for the same period. European Americana, which catalogs books printed in Europe related to the Americas, lists 4,937. Beyond these crude quantitative measures, there is also a qualitative dimension—the majority of New England imprints were utilitarian documents, rather than intellectual interventions. Among these forty-two are eleven Harvard thesis announcements, nine almanacs, four works related to evangelizing Indians, and four catechisms. By contrast, only two sermons and one other theological work appear on the list, along with John Norton’s Heart of N-England Rent (1659), an anti-Quaker tract. Also, if reaching a broad audience is part of the reason for publishing, then publishing for the small New England readership amounted to a print version of the sort of coterie publication Philip Round describes in a scribal context.

Instead, publishing in England was the rule for New England theologians like Cotton. After his migration to America in 1633, John Cotton never returned to England, yet, during his lifetime, none of the thirty-six titles of which he was the primary author was published in America. Thus, everything that appeared under his name after from his migration to his death, and beyond, was the product of an errand performed by someone else. These errands, however, did not require Cotton’s consent, or even his cognizance. Even under the best of circumstances, his manuscripts faced a long series of intermediate steps, which could delay, distort, or discredit his pronouncements.

More particularly, the exchange between Cotton and Williams is a phenomenon of involuntary authorship, for Cotton did not ask for this
debate, even though he appears to initiate it. In fact, the two exchanges comprising the debate began as two separate fights picked in print by Williams. Cotton’s letter to Williams ostensibly opens the debate, but he had written this letter to Williams long ago, in New England. Williams’s supporters in London were evidently behind its appearance in London, choosing to disseminate it in the metropolis beyond its colonial audience of one. It appeared late in 1643, while Mr. Cotton’s Letter Examined appeared early in 1644, suggesting perhaps that Williams had prepared his response ahead of time and released it after the “accidental” publication of Mr. Cotton’s Letter. If Williams did not convey this letter to the press himself, it is hard to imagine how this letter could appear without his connivance. Not only would Williams have to make the letter available to whomever did carry it to the press, but he would have needed to bring it with him from Providence.

Similarly, the Bloudy Tenent takes the form of an extended commentary on Cotton’s 1635 commentary on a 1620 letter from an imprisoned Anabaptist. The remainder of the work is largely a critique of “A Model of Church and Civil Power,” which Williams claims was delivered by Cotton and others to the church at Salem, but survives only in the portions of it quoted by Williams. Cotton, however, vigorously denied having a hand in this document in his 1647 response, The Bloudy Tenent Washed and Made White in the Bloud of the Lamb. In both cases, Cotton begins his rejoinder to Williams with a protest against the unauthorized appearance of his words. Cotton states in his Reply to Mr. Williams that while he owns the letter to be his, “how it came to be put in print, I cannot imagine. Sure I am it was without my Privitie: and when I heard of it, it was to me unwelcome Newes, as knowing the truth, and weight of Plinies speech, ‘Aliud est scribere uni, aliud omnibus.’” Cotton suggests that “there be those who thinke it was published by Mr. Williams himselfe, or by some of his friends, [who] tooke more libertie than God alloweth, to draw forth a private admonition to publick notice in a disorderly way.” He initially suspected Sabine Staresmore, an associate of Williams’s with Separatist leanings.

The 1647 appearance of The Bloudy Tenent Washed was Cotton’s first legitimate participation in this debate, and did not appear nearly four years elapsed. Williams, who faced the same challenges, retorted with The Bloody Tenent yet more Bloody, but not until 1652. Roger Williams enjoyed the last word, for Cotton died before he could respond.

The form of the debate becomes something like playing chess by mail,
and given its desultory conclusion, it is hard to imagine a referee awarding a win to either antagonist. Beyond the content of debate, or its outcome, it is worth remembering that the entire exchange was one Cotton would have preferred not to have. However, Cotton’s woes as an unwilling author are not limited to this antagonistic context. His lack of control over the texts appearing with his name is symptomatic of a challenge he faced throughout his years in New England. As the title of this chapter suggests, Cotton enjoyed authorial control over no more than half of the titles he published. Nor is this phenomenon unique to Cotton. Like Cotton, the other leading lights of the Bay Colony’s ministers stayed in New England, and did not travel back, so Cotton’s experience reflects the challenges New England’s clergy faced in participating in the momentous political and religious debates of the 1640s. The ocean made the ideological work of orthodoxy harder, even as it made the political work of dissent easier.

II: Spinning Cotton

The half of Cotton’s work where he lacks authorial control consists of three varieties, broadly speaking. There are unreliable transcriptions, untimely publications, and unauthorized publication. In this final category, one might include published responses to unfriendly queries. The kinds of distortions each can produce warrant separate description, for each has its own way of unraveling Cotton’s authority and autonomy as an author. Of the thirty-six imprints with Cotton as the author that appeared between 1633, the year of his migration, and 1653, the year after his death, eighteen fall into one of the categories of compromised authorship. There are nine transcribed sermons, one untimely publication, three unauthorized letters, and five responses to queries.

First and most innocently, almost all of Cotton’s sermons appearing after his emigration were prepared from the notes of others. Such publications were intended to honor Cotton, but they were transcribed from notes of varying reliability, and frequently many years after they were preached, and as such are difficult to accept as fully representative of Cotton’s later thinking. While many important texts have been produced under such circumstances, such as Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*, from the author’s standpoint it is not ideal. One need only imagine the trepidation that might attend a professor opening a book prepared by his or her students from his or her lecture notes to grasp the difficulty Cotton faced.
These delays could also produce a second, more damaging distortion, when controversial works circulating in manuscript appeared in print after the publication of other texts representing a later stage of Cotton’s thought. Continuing the analogy to academic life, a professor might well be dismayed if his or her seminar papers appeared in print after articles derived from those papers had already been published.

Third, and most harmful, was the deliberate publication of private correspondence of Cotton with the intent to discredit him—and a collateral phenomenon, which was the publication of his responses to unfriendly queries from London Presbyterians. Here, to conclude the analogy, it is hard to imagine who would welcome an unauthorized anthology of their email messages.

To consider the first case, while Cotton owes a considerable portion of his reputation to his published sermons and sermon series, such as *God’s promise to his plantations* (1634), *The pouring out of the Seven Vials* (1642), and the *Exposition of the whole book of Canticles* (1642, 2nd ed. 1648) these sermons have two major liabilities as reflections of Cotton’s thought. In many cases, they appeared in print decades after he preached them, and the texts were prepared from the notes of his auditors. In addition to these examples, there are other sermons that appeared posthumously, like the *Commentary on the first Epistle of John* (1656). Some, like *God’s Promise*, appeared in a timely fashion, but most appeared after long intervals. As a rule, these sermons appear through the agency of one of Cotton’s auditors, and without the minister’s approval or participation. Apologies for this manner of transmission are formulaic in the prefaces to Cotton’s sermons: in a preface to the *Way of Life* (1641) William Morton admits, “How gratefull it may be to this Reverend author, that this work of his should come abroad into the publick censure, I know not . . . I could have wished (if it might have been) that it had passed under his censure . . . but seeing it was designed for the Presse, that desire I had of the Publicke good and the respect I have ever owed the author, inclined me to lend it the best furtherance I could.”\(^{17}\) Introducing the *Seven Vials*, one I.H. (John Humfrey) characterizes the text as “a taste of the ordinary week-dayes Exercise of that Reverend man, taken from his own mouth, whose Pen would have more fully answered thy greatest expectations, could his time, afforded him more liberty and leisure.”\(^{18}\) However, John Winthrop commented in his Journal that “Mr. Humfrey had gotten the notes from some who had took them by characters and printed them in London . . . which was
a great wrong to Mr. Cotton . . . for it had been fit he should have perused and corrected the copy before it had been printed.”

Recognizing this irregularity does not erase Cotton’s contributions as a theologian—indeed, the number of his sermons that were published from parishioners’ notes is a tribute to his influence and charisma, while posthumous publication is a measure of the strength of his legacy. In the culture of revolutionary London, however, it does diminish his authority as an author. In an intensely contentious print culture, the way Cotton appeared in print often deprived him of a significant degree of control. Simply put, in an arena where replies, animadversions, remonstrances, apologies, and answers to the same question could appear on London bookstalls within days of one another, decade-old sermons lacked the polemical vigor that readers in revolutionary London had come to expect.

Indeed, Cotton’s removal to Boston may have promoted the appearance of these kinds of texts: Introducing *Gods Mercie Mixt with his Justice* (1641) Matthew Swallowe describes the text as “his mantle left behind him,” namely “some broken notes of his powerfull soule searching sermons, taken from his mouth by the diligent hand of some well-disposed hearers and followers” (A2). While the appearance of these texts in the early 1640s is a testament to the enduring esteem of Cotton’s London friends, the notion of imperfect transcripts of sermons delivered in relative youth to a provincial audience suddenly appearing in Revolutionary London, even as matters of faith and polity were the subject of passionate debate, seems to have made Cotton uneasy—Cotton complained in a 1648 sermon on the same text that his 1642 Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles was published without his “privitie.”

Cotton’s followers may have done him a disservice—diluting his authority by publishing belated and poorly transcribed sermons—but similar efforts on behalf of controversial works could have a more damaging result. The *Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1644) Cotton regarded as his definitive statement of Congregational polity; its assertions were muddled by the subsequent appearance of the *Way of the Churches of New England* (1645), an earlier manuscript that had circulated in that form and that reached the press after Cotton’s authorized pronouncements.

In the case of the *Keys* and the *Way*, the phenomenon of scribal publication complicates questions of publication and authorial agency. Building on Harold Love’s influential study of scribal publication in seventeenth-century England, Philip Round argues that the circulation of texts
in manuscript played a significant role in the cultural life of New England. To be sure, such influential texts as Bradford’s and Winthrop’s histories, and Bradstreet’s poetry, circulated and were familiar in New England at the time of their composition, and well in advance of their belated publication. Manuscript letters, Round argues, “helped to extend the metropolitan discursive network that was beginning to unite Puritans into a formidable political community across England.”

“Discursive network” suggests a coherence and consensus that empirical evidence does not support. This “formidable political community,” of course, faced vigorous opposition, and scribal publication facilitated the opposition to this community as much as it enabled its members to circulate their writings. In particular, the *Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* (1645) circulated in manuscript and attracted the disapprobation of the Presbyterian apologist Robert Baillie’s *Dissuasive from the Errours of our Time*, before Cotton’s supporters brought it to the press so that Cotton’s argument might enjoy the same currency as Baillie’s uncharitable rejoinder. In Cotton’s thinking, however, the *Way of the Churches of New England* was an exercise preliminary to *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*, and not intended for public view. It was left to John Owen, years later, to clarify that the *Way* had been printed “without the author’s privity, and to his regret.”

The Atlantic magnified the difficulty and delay Cotton faced in debating his Presbyterian opponents by responding to this sort of unauthorized publication. In *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (1648) (distinct from *Way of the Churches of New England*), shepherded through the press by Nathaniel Holmes, Cotton responds to Daniel Cawdry’s rejoinder to his *Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*, *Vindicae Clavium* (1645). In *Vindicae Clavium*, Cawdry makes much of inconsistencies between Cotton’s *Keys*, and his *Way of the Churches of New England*. In response, Cotton opens by pointing out, “I have not had liberty to peruse the Way since it was published: but I see by the first words of it that the publishers had not the copy which was taken hence from me, but an imperfect transcript. But I do believe what the publishers do report . . . there is no material difference between the Key and the Way.” Here, Cotton must defend this text, which was published without his consent, of which he has not a copy, and to an audience with rather different concerns than those of three years previously. Quite simply, the time it took for manuscripts to cross, and for books to return, across the Atlantic makes it nearly impossible for Cotton
to defend himself against his Presbyterian antagonists, and to be a full participant in the momentous debates of the 1640s.

The career of John Cotton offers a useful perspective on the distinct challenges and opportunities that shaped the portion of transatlantic discourse that originated in America. In considering the dissemination of his ideas in New England and Old as two very different contexts, we gain a new understanding of how these key articulations of the New England Way functioned on both sides of the Atlantic. The record suggests that effort of ministers and magistrates to control events, ideas, and discourse in New England was mirrored in their loss of control over the means, timing, and nature of their appearance in print in London.

In an intensely contentious and volatile print culture, several of the ways Cotton appears in print deprived him of a significant portion of control. Conversely, Roger Williams was able to represent himself and his colony’s interests much more directly, though still through the medium of print. Williams’s presence in London gave him an advantage in his battle with Cotton and the Bay Colony authorities. While Williams had the eyes and ears of Vane and Parliament, Cotton was forced to send his salvos from across the ocean, at targets that shifted and changed in the time it took for his words to reach England.