

Brown, Matthew P. *The Pilgrim and the Bee: Reading Rituals and Book Culture in Early New England*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2007. xiv, 265 pp.
\$65.00.

Matthew Brown's *The Pilgrim and the Bee* is both a model for scholars interested in the intersection of reception studies and book history and an excellent work in Puritan studies. Reader-oriented critics will be interested in Brown's argument for a turn away from author-centered literary history in early American studies and towards a text-centered model that emphasizes the reception and consumption of texts.

The kind of change in our orientation towards seventeenth-century culture Brown argues for is, in fact, signaled by his title. We are used to thinking of readers as pilgrims traveling an epic journey from cover to cover to arrive at spiritual awakening. The reader moves from page to page in a continuous fashion until reaching the end of his destination, where he has been transformed by the process. Brown suggests that a better metaphor, which is embedded in many of the steady-selling devotional works he examines, is the bee. Bees travel from flower to flower, not to get to some specific destination but to collect spiritual nectar. They never really complete their journey, but must continue it throughout their lives. Furthermore, the bee's route is discontinuous and reflects more accurately what the technology of the codex, with its paratextual apparatuses such as indices and the like, affords. Brown's work has rightfully garnered much attention for its careful scholarship, but this review raises a few cautionary notes about the project as a way of suggesting some future possibilities for research by book historians and reception theorists.

Brown opens his book with a phenomenological account of reading. He describes the various ways a reader might pick up a book, the ways that object might encourage different kinds of uses, and the ways those uses might encourage different forms of reception. The book as a material object is the fundamental premise of this work, and Brown builds on that premise to make several related arguments. First, he calls for a revisionist history of early American culture that recognizes the importance of understanding steady-selling devotional texts. Second, he demonstrates that the specific physical properties of these books encouraged a non-linear reading habit, which leads him to demonstrate the importance of what he calls "the thick style" of Puritan writing. Finally, we get a general argument for the importance of book history as a method of literary scholarship.

Brown's first chapter is the most far reaching. There he examines the New England book trade, defines "the thick style," and gives a reading of Psalm 119. The book trade in New England was heavily regulated in that only a few books became habitual sellers, but Brown claims, "the conservatism of the market should not blind us to the complexity of book culture for early New Englanders" (25). Indeed, following the work of David Hall, Brown argues that the ideology of print valorized the printed book as both a symbol of the sacredness of God's word and as a material commodity. The market economy coexisted with a gift economy, which helped distribute devotional texts to a variety of readers, thus reaffirming the ideology of the covenant in complex and contradictory ways. In other words, Brown provides a corrective to works that put too much emphasis on the reader-subject at the expense of the book-object.

As material objects, seventeenth century books had a number of notable features that lead Brown to coin the term "thick style," a play on what the Puritans called "the plain style" (31-2). Previous scholars have done much to unpack the complexity of the plain style, and Brown expands significantly on their work by emphasizing how the materiality of New England texts influenced their use. In a word, these texts were "thick." Many were over six-hundred pages and served primarily as reference works. The codex format allowed readers to behave like spiritual bees, extracting and occasionally depositing information discontinuously. Furthermore, whereas most treatments of the Puritans explore the works they wrote, which were often private, unpublished and obscure, this study emphasizes the kinds of works Puritans consumed, most of which were not produced in New England.

Brown's reading of Psalm 119 helps us understand the implication of his findings for both literary history in general and the history of New England in particular. Psalm 119 invokes the ideal scene of reading in Reformation culture as it "catalogues the behavioral mores of the redeemed subject within puritan devotional style" (35). Traditionally, biblical scholars have understood this Psalm, which is the longest Psalm, as a collection of discrete psalms, petitions, and appeals, but Brown argues that the Puritans understood it as a complex reference system or information storehouse. Almost every line of 119 refers to the Torah in some fashion and is organized like an abecedary of the Hebrew alphabet. Brown demonstrates the various ways it was incorporated into steady-selling devotional works like *The Godly Man's Ark* and how these in turn influenced a variety of other kinds of texts, including commonplace books, almanac-diaries, and other works. What is especially notable throughout the book is Brown's ability to

highlight the contingencies of the archive, pointing out what has and has not remained for us to examine.

Chapters two through four examine the devotional sellers and the kinds of reading practices they required, paying special attention to their role in Puritan rituals of fasting and mourning. While these are worthwhile chapters in their own right, the last chapter is perhaps the most provocative in the book. Here Brown examines the Eliot mission, or, more specifically, the works of the “Indian Library,” a collection of devotional books written in the Massachusetts dialect, including an “Indian Bible.” According to Brown, John Eliot’s mission to convert the natives promoted written literacy at the expense of orality, and Brown reads representation of Amer-Indians within the texts of the Eliot press. For example, Brown claims that “a native’s pious gestures of the body represent both affective spirituality and defective linguistic skills” (180). This argument about literacy is not so surprising, but Brown’s claim that the jeremiad tradition was “dependent on the Eliot’s mission publication effort” certainly is (183).

Brown explains that much of the literature on the so-called Half-Way Covenant was published by Eliot, including much of the material Perry Miller used to compose *Errand into the Wilderness*, a fact that even postcolonial critics of Miller undervalue. Brown, therefore, uses book history as a corrective to both these traditions by exploring the role of this press in the free-grace debate of the 1630s and the witchcraft persecutions of the 1690s.

Brown’s reading of New England print culture is an invaluable contribution to book history and reception studies. However, we should take pause and concern ourselves with several aspects of the project, perhaps as a way of considering what avenues of research have been opened by this project. Although Brown has managed to make some fascinating observations about the already well-researched Puritans, one wonders what would have happened if the scope of the project were less centered on New England as early American studies has increasingly been since the late 1990s. What would a book history that was centered on the hemispheric turn in Early American literature look like? Alternatively, would a book history call the hemispheric turn into question? Especially interesting might be the movement across languages, which Brown at least considers when examining the Eliot tracks. Indeed, there is still considerable work to be done about the steady sellers in other colonies, especially in those colonies where French or Spanish might be as important as English.

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