Bailey on Gruesz, 'Cotton Mather’s Spanish Lessons: A Story of Language, Race, and Belonging in the Early Americas'

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The Mather family might well possess the most well-known surname of colonial America. Even before Perry Miller reintroduced readers to this prominent family, let alone Robert Middlekauff’s important 1989 study about Richard, Increase, and Cotton, the Mathers stood out as significant leaders in the formative years of the British colonies on the mainland of North America.[1] Generally, though, their influence is seen as connected primarily, if not only, to the Puritan colonies in New England. The Mathers, therefore, are typically seen as connected to the development of religious ideas in the colonies of Massachusetts and Connecticut. And, as illustrated in the Salem Witch Trials of the 1690s, this family had less than positive influences. Kirsten Silva Gruesz’s Cotton Mather’s Spanish Lessons: A Story of Language, Race, and Belonging in the Early Americas helps broaden the scope of at least one of the Mathers. Situating Cotton Mather among “diverse” religious, national, and ethnic communities, Gruesz places one of the most prolific writers of the colonial era squarely in the Atlantic world, entangling the Boston divine (and some of his colleagues) not only in conversations of his time that centered on race and difference, but also affording him the opportunity to participate in the shaping of race as a meaningful concept in explaining perceived differences.

For this reviewer, perhaps the most exciting part of Cotton Mather’s Spanish Lessons is the way Gruesz situates Mather among communities other than the one in which he is most commonly considered, namely, white New England Puritans. She accomplishes this goal by building her argument around the methodology of a literary history, focusing both on specific sources and texts as well as on the ideas of translation and language learning. Of course, other scholars have focused on Mather’s voluminous writings, but the novel thing in this case is that Gruesz does not concentrate on his more popular works, such as Biblia Americana (wr. 1693-1728) and Magnalia Christi Americana (1702). Instead she turns her attention to La Fe del Christiano, a 1699 collection of two Spanish tracts, which she includes as a facing-page transcription in her final chapter. This focus allows Gruesz to place the influential minister within a larger, arguably more significant, context as she contends that as Mather experimented with what it meant to be an author, he “absorbed and reassembled” the words of others in a translational manner (p. 8).
Beginning with an explication of what it meant for Mather to be an integral participant in the English efforts not only to establish colonies in mainland North America that would seek to evangelize Native Americans, but also to serve as missionary ventures to those caught within the grasp of Spanish Catholicism, Gruesz convincingly demonstrates that early colonists like the Mathers might best be described as a sort of Creole and that such creolization affected the ways such colonials interacted with early Americans both within and without their narrow communities. Such an understanding of the English efforts in North America not only entangles Mather in the contexts of his moment, but allows both the minister and some of his colleagues to comprehend the world in which they lived, which extended well beyond the provincial and specific religious contexts of early New England.

Throughout her work, Gruesz traces Mather’s "entangling" as she builds a speculative history not only of Mather’s proficiency with Spanish, but also of how he relies on various popular literature genres of his day and builds on the pioneering work of other missionaries working in non-English languages. This portion of her work entangles Mather in Protestant missions efforts, as well as in the production and composition of books as physical artifacts. This reviewer found her treatment of the possible ways that Mather’s unknown printer produced a Spanish text from English type as especially insightful both for how it demonstrates the ingenuity and commitment of printers in producing work that would be seen as acceptable in the eyes of readers, and for how Gruesz uses this moment to remind "us how entangled [Boston] was with the rest of the Americas" (p. 177).

After illustrating the ways in which Mather positioned himself and his community within the context of the larger milieu of his day, Gruesz then demonstrates how this position allowed him to engage in the development of race as a category for identifying and explaining perceived differences. Like most of the argument preceding this portion, Greusz locates Mather within imperial conflicts between the English and other European nations such as the French and the Spanish, as well as within a nascent race frontier bringing Europeans, indigenous persons, and Africans in regular contact with one another. Such interaction, she contends, fueled racial fears and prompted his acceptance of race as a way to make sense of the perceived differences between people of these various groups. While she could likely have demonstrated even more effectively how his theology allowed for such racial thinking, her handling of the life of the enslaved man Onesimus alongside Mather’s 1693 “Rules for the Society of Negroes,” The Negro Christianized (1706), and Another Tongue Brought in to Confess the Great Saviour of the World (1707) demonstrate some of the ways New England Puritans were wrestling with making sense of their place in the rapidly changing world around them.

In sum, Kirsten Silva Gruesz’s Cotton Mather’s Spanish Lessons illustrates something that more than a few other scholars have previously established, namely, Mather exerted a significant influence on the development of colonial New England. But Gruesz’s take is a new one. As she revisits the life and writings of Mather especially as connected to his La Fe del Christiano, she illustrates that his significance went well beyond the basic religious world of New England, entangling him in the broader, imperial context of the early modern world.

Note

Press, 1953).


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