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The Captive Life of a Puritan Woman: Mary Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative

A fury of fire, bullets and Narragansett Indians descended upon the British settlement of Lancaster, Massachusetts, on the tenth of February 1675. One raid amongst many others that emerged during King Philip's War due to the overflowing tensions of colonial expansion between Native Americans and English settlers. Twenty-four English settlers were dragged from their homes and taken into the custody of the Native Americans, including a woman named Mary Rowlandson (Rowlandson 14). As a respected wife of Joseph Rowlandson, a Puritan minister of the Lancaster church, and mother of three children, Mary Rowlandson quickly became an important political prisoner, heavily sought after by English authorities. For eleven strenuous weeks, she traversed the wilderness amongst her captors. Along the way, she lost one of her children and saw the other two seized by two other Indian groups. As her traditional Puritan lifestyle slipped away, she had to interact with the enemy, eat the food of the wild, and enter into their economic system as a seamstress until she was later ransomed and returned to Lancaster. About a year after her release from captivity, she wrote an autobiographical narrative, entitled *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, that details the physical and psychological toll she endured during her capture. She interprets her experiences within a deeply religious Puritan framework and "draws on Scripture more than eighty times" in her narrative, aligning herself to the spirituality of her repressive Puritan lifestyle (Downing 252).

She chronicles her journey through ‘removes,’ conveying her movement deeper into the darkness of the wilderness and farther away from the civilized light of home. Through her delivery, it is evident that the patriarchy within her society haunts her borderlands experience with the Native Americans as she tries to maintain her virtuous position as a Puritan woman and participate in the Indigenous culture. As a result, the unacknowledged contradictions revealed in the narrative suggest that Mary Rowlandson is a captive not only within the Native American tribe, but also a captive of idealized gender and cultural roles within her own Puritan community.

Due to the colonists’ fascination with the savage ‘other,’ Rowlandson’s novel was a contemporary best seller, selling over a thousand copies within America and England (Derounian 82). The widespread popularity of the novel led to copies being “read to shreds,” inevitably going through four editions within its first year of publication to satisfy its readers (Potter 153). Her narrative was one of the earliest novels within a long and complex line of ‘Indian Captivity Narratives,’ which were stories told by non-Native Americans captured by Indigenous peoples. These narratives proved to be important literary forms that recorded the initial contact between the English colonists and the Native Americans, two cultures that had inhabited the same country but had little experience interacting with one another (Burnham 61). However, the fact that these accounts were told through the exclusive format of literacy indicates that Native Americans have no ability to inform the audience of their side of the story. Overall, there is no mention of “Native Americans as the subjects of culture or white women as active agents in their lives during captivity” (Castiglia 3), thus these accounts represented the ideals that white men desired to publicize. Indeed, Rowlandson’s narrative commences with a forward by “Per Amicum” (“by a friend”), who is assumed to be the Puritan minister Increase Mather, a male of prestige and

authority (Derounian 85). Mather's preface and the surface of Rowlandson's narrative rely on the constructed binary oppositions between colonists and the Native Americans to circulate the Puritan cultural identity and condemn the Indians, thus confirming the hierarchy of gender and nation within the New World for their Puritan audience. In turn, the initial success of her narrative reveals how discrimination and cultural distinction fueled the New World. However, in recent years, various readings and interpretations of Mary Rowlandson's narrative have explored the inadvertent ambivalences directed at Native Americans within her account, contradictions to the Puritan ideology that Mather attempts to erase.

Within his preface, Increase Mather endorses his traditionalist model for New England by framing the narrative and capturing Rowlandson within the patriarchy of their Puritan society. As a powerful Puritan clergyman and influential spiritual advisor, Mather had plenty to gain from the publication and distribution of Rowlandson's spiritual journey amongst the natives. In his written account and reflection of King Philip's War, "A Brief History of the Warr with the Indians in New-England," Mather proclaimed that the war was a divine punishment decreed by God upon the English colonists who were becoming increasingly neglectful of religion (7). The Indians were the enemies sent to discipline the colonists and encourage them to repent. Thus, Mather establishes Rowlandson's narrative as confirmation of a redeemed captive who possesses unwavering faith in God. Furthermore, because of the strict gender roles, Mather introduces the feminine part that she must adhere to, a part that she willingly submits to. During the seventeenth century, it was improper for a woman to aspire to gain any sort of widespread recognition or fame, thus the publication of a work by a female author was quite controversial. Rowlandson can only securely enter into the public domain by subjecting herself to a male while simultaneously

maintaining her virtuous and passive attitude throughout the text. Accordingly, Mather ensures the audience that the purpose of Rowlandson's writing was not to obtain some sort of celebrity, but rather for the intention of exemplifying the wonderful power of God. His preface ensures that the audience receives the "proper interpretation of the work and the woman" by enclosing "the entire text within his own legitimating frame, identifying for readers the spaces of signification" (Logan 264). Increase Mather sets the foundation for animosity towards the Native Americans, characterizing them as the "Atheistical, proud, wild, cruel, barbarous, brutish, (in one word) diabolical Creatures," (Mather 10). In contrast, he draws attention to the morality and respectability Rowlandson exhibits. Mather praises her "pious scope," asserting that it "deserves both commendation and imitation" ("A True History" 9). This approval on Mather's part suggests that the audience should focus on the truth and deliverance of the Lord during a Puritan's hardships, rather than the fact that a woman is writing it. By denoting that Rowlandson's work and journey is one of great piety, he negates any possibility that this work can be read in a such a way that critiques the Puritan lifestyle. He reassures the nervous subjects of their community that she has not returned impure or contaminated by the Native Americans, thus protecting her from any wrongful evaluation of her character. His insistence that Rowlandson never strays from the ideals of the Puritan patriarchy affirms for the audience that she is a good Puritan woman uncorrupted by the 'sinful' Native Americans. As a result, Mather dilutes the impact of a female writer and controls the meaning of the narrative for the purpose of propagating his own agenda. The fact that Increase Mather's preface is included at all confirms that this work could not stand on its own without his imposition. Nonetheless, Rowlandson

accepts the restrictions placed on female authorship, retaining her position as a Puritan woman and servant of God.

Rowlandson interprets her experiences within a Puritan framework, thus conforming to the ideologies of her society. At the outset and throughout, she self fashions herself as a true Christian woman suitable for Puritan society, possessing the qualities of purity, dependence, humility, and obedience. It is apparent that she fully submits to the power structure of her colonial community, offering “no blasphemous competition to the patriarchal hegemony” and maintaining her submissive position as a woman, “subjecting herself first to God as ultimate authority and then to males as his earthly representatives” (Davis 50). Essentially, Rowlandson’s narrative can be read as a direct religious text, reflecting upon the benevolence of God. In the twentieth remove,<sup>1</sup> she recollects an opportunity she had for escape, “in my Travels an Indian came to me, and told me, if I were willing, he and his Squaw would run away, and go home along with me. I told him, No, I was not willing to runaway, but desired to wait God’s time... now God hath granted me my desire” (Rowlandson 46). Rather than crediting herself for surviving or the Native Americans for releasing her, she asserts that by God’s grace she was saved from her captors and returned home. Her Puritan orthodoxy takes precedence over individual will, further conveying her entrapment within her society. In turn, she glorifies the Puritans and creates a blatant bias against the Native Americans through her Christian perspective.

Rhetorically, Rowlandson maintains her distance from her captors by abiding by the Puritan’s anti-Indian sentiment. Believing that they were the chosen ones in God’s eyes, Puritans

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<sup>1</sup> Rowlandson’s narrative is organized into twenty removes. Each remove represents a stage of her relocation with the Native Americans.

imposed their sense of self righteous onto their views of Native Americans. Rowlandson aligns herself within these ideals of Puritan imagination by succumbing to the notion that Native Americans are “cruel heathens” (Rowlandson 47). On the first night of her capture, she portrays the Indians as the dark forces of Satan, describing their dancing and yelling as a “a lively resemblance of Hell” (Rowlandson 14). She presents the Native Americans as binary oppositions to the English, thus conforming herself to the approved norms and status within her community. Any acknowledgement that her captors have any aspect of humanity or esteem would be detrimental to her Eurocentric worldview. Therefore, she characterizes the Native Americans as “murderous wretches” (Rowlandson 12), “barbarous creatures” (14), and “merciless enemies” (23), distinguishing them from the “lovely faces of Christians” (35). This ‘self versus other’ dynamic employs a strategy of separation between herself and the Indians, implying her sense of superiority over them. Ironically, through her captive experiences, Rowlandson unintentionally proves that she is capable of living amongst the ‘uncivilized,’ indirectly conveying that her captors are not actually savage beings.

As Rowlandson spends more time with her captors, she undergoes a gradual process of acculturation and exhibits attitudes and skills that her culture thought her incapable of. Within her work “Mary White Rowlandson’s Self-Fashioning as Puritan Good wife,” Davis asserts that during Rowlandson’s time in the wilderness, she “looked into her own soul and found a self capable of a range of alternatives: of slipping into bestiality, of surviving outside of community...” (Davis 58). This admission conveys the idea that the Indians have their own way of life that she does not fully understand yet, but she is capable of doing so if she stepped out of the boundaries of her Puritan ideology. Prior to her captivity, she had never experienced what it

meant to exist among the Native Americans, however once immersed in their lifestyle, she reveals that she is capable of adapting. For instance, during the first and second week of her captivity, Rowlandson eats very little of the food, often raw meat, that the Indians offered to her, claiming that it was “hard to get down their filthy trash” (Rowlandson 21). However, by the third week, she confesses that the taste of their food was “pleasant and savory” (Rowlandson 21-22). This action further separates her from her Puritan community and the social order that she is expected to adhere to. Furthermore, in spite of her acclaimed passivity, Rowlandson increasingly has to rely on her own ingenuity in order to survive among her captors in the harsh wilderness. She utilizes her skills in knitting and sewing as an agent to enter into the Indigenous economic system. She earns herself a distinct role with the Algonquians by exchanging her handmade clothing for money, food or other goods, thus creating a sense of equality between herself and her captors. This allows her to become a more vital part of the Indigenous community, ultimately conveying her ability to live independently of her society. It is evident that she does not fully isolate herself, rather she actively participates in their way of life. Additionally, during the seventeenth remove, she states “the Indians sate down by a Wigwam discoursing, but I was almost spent, and could scarce speak” (Rowlandson 35), suggesting that she would normally join in on their conversation. The freedom that Rowlandson possesses within the Native American community is something unattainable to her in her Puritan society. Also, in the twelfth remove, she reiterates a conversation between herself and her master, Quinopin, the sagamore (or leader) of the Narragansett Indians. She recalls that when she asked him if she will ever be returned to her husband, he replies with “nux,” the Algonquin word for yes (Rowlandson 28). This implies that she knows their language to a certain extent and reveals the fact that the Native American

did not intend to kill her. Thus, the Native Americans have some pity for their captive and they are not the callous creatures they are portrayed to be.

Rowlandson's participation within the Native American lifestyle reveals a contradiction between the Puritan imagination and the reality of her situation. Inadvertently, she corrects the violent misconceptions about Native Americans and the wilderness. Although her text never explicitly reveals the sympathy of the Native Americans, Rowlandson details and records the acts of kindness and generosity that her captors bestow upon her. One Indian gives her a Bible, providing some source of solace in her capture (Rowlandson 19). Two other Indians comfort her one night as she cries: "There one of them asked me, why I wept; I could hardly tell what to say; yet answered, they would kill me: No, said he, none will hurt you. Then came one of them, and gave me two spoonfuls of Meal (to comfort me) and another gave me half a pint of Pease" (Rowlandson 24). Both incidences deconstruct the stereotype of the 'savage' and offer a complex and sympathetic view of the Indigenous. Furthermore, a common belief among the Puritan community is that Native Americans are enemies of sexual danger ("Sexual Violence, Race, and Colonialism"). White males believed that, under enemy hands, their white women would be raped. However, Rowlandson insists that her purity remained intact throughout her captivity, establishing that "not one of them ever offer the least abuse of unchastity to me, in word or action" (Rowlandson 46). Rowlandson breaks down the myths centered around the Native Americans and finds humanity in their actions. In her journal article, "The Journey Between: Liminality and Dialogism in Mary White Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative," Michelle Burnham argues that there is a split in tone within Rowlandson's narrative, as if "the detailed observations of her physical journey were recorded by one voice, and the scriptural quotations and



conclusions drawn from her experience recorded by another” (Burnham 61). Remarkably, Burnham reveals that this introduces a stylistic paradox in which her participatory experiences and dialogue with the Indigenous peoples challenge the interpretive conclusions drawn from them. Burnham goes on further to note:

“Yet these contradictions, which are so obvious to a modern reader of the *Narrative*, do not appear to have existed for its author nor for its earliest read. There is nothing in Rowlandson’s prose which indicates an awareness of the structural dissonance between her orthodox Puritan belief that the Indians are savage and cruel heathens, and her portrayal of individuals Indians who are sympathetic and human. Explanations for Rowlandson’s two ‘voices’ typically locate the source of that duality in a contradiction between the individual psychology of the captive and the demands of Puritan society” (Burnham 61).

The dichotomy present between her narration and her interpretation of the events happening to her reveal how she attempts to resist any ambivalences produced in her account, however they intrude nonetheless. Any sort of recognition that Rowlandson was aware of this duality would have subverted her Puritan message and her seventeenth century readership would have judged her harshly for it. As a result, the narrative balances the precarious position of independence and subservience, savage and civilized, as Rowlandson seeks to maintain her allegiance to her Christian community.

Further depicting her restrained gender role within her society and her adherence to the Puritan norms, Rowlandson’s interactions with the female warrior-leader, Weetamoo, emphasizes her confusion and condemnation of female leadership. Within her society, Rowlandson was accustomed to being called Mistress, a term that confirms her position as equal to female peers, the supervisor of her servants and the complement to her husband’s “Mister” (Potter 55). However, in a culture that operates on fewer gendered divisions, Rowlandson’s social standing meant nothing. As the “squaw sachem” of the Pocassets, Weetamoo was the real

Mistress in her current situation. Nonetheless, Rowlandson interprets the actions of Weetamoo through the perspective of a traditional Puritan woman whose culture tells her to value the ideals of female purity and chastity as well as their patriarchal system. Even in a foreign culture, she submits to certain Native American males “as distorted images of authority in her imposed society” (Davis 54). Rowlandson accepts Quinopin as her master and listens to the command of King Philip (also known as Metacom). This stresses how deeply ingrained the Puritan ideals of a woman’s duty to accept male authority are in her mind. Tiffany Potter notes in her journal article, “Writing Indigenous Femininity: Mary Rowlandson’s Narrative of Captivity,” that Rowlandson’s “passionate efforts to maintain her Eurocentric Puritan self-identity do not permit her to understand... the distinct cultural demands and separate hierarchies that determine femininity in the culture with which she is forced to engage” (Potter 153). The limitations forced onto her by the gender roles in her society shape the way she perceives Weetamoo, thus she cannot understand the ways in which the Native Americans allow women any sort of political power. For instance, she reports that Weetamoo is a “severe and proud Dame... bestowing every day in dressing herself near as much time as any Gentry of the land: powdering her hair, and painting her face, going with her Neck-laces, with Jewels in her ears, and bracelets upon her hands” (Rowlandson 37). Rowlandson has been taught in her society that a respectable woman must be modest and not draw attention to herself. Thus, she condemns Weetamoo for traversing into the boundaries of masculinity and implies that she is a vain and pretentious woman for wearing her wealth. What Rowlandson fails to comprehend is that Weetamoo is merely demonstrating her political status within her society. Her reaction models the uncertainty and

ignorance that infiltrate gender frontiers.<sup>2</sup> Her natural tendency to recognize any female as inferior to a male is disrupted and dispelled, which emphasizes her “difficulty reading this new world with her old set of clues” (Logan 257). The conflict between the Puritan imagination of the savage and Rowlandson’s own narration conveys the complexity regarding the perceptions of Native Americans in the New World. Overall, the experience gives insight into the shifting boundaries of culture and gender.

For eight-three days, Mary Rowlandson endured the harsh wilderness and lived amongst ‘savages.’ In light of her limitations as a female author, her ability to voice her experiences and opinions is firmly hindered by the social order of the Puritan community. Thus, this novel operates as a way to promote the belief that God is a powerful being that saves and punishes Christians. The restrictions placed onto her suppose that “‘captivity’ is both the occasion for her writing and a telling metaphor for her position” within her own society (Logan 256). As her narrative progresses, there is an implication that she moves farther and farther away from the conventions of her society. Although, on the surface she repeats the tropes of the savage and reiterates Puritan values, she also contradicts this ideology through her actions, inadvertently subverts her religious belief system and demystifies the notion of the uncivilized ‘other.’ Her narrative not only reflected upon her sense of piety, but also provided an appealing tale of cultural escape (Derounian 72). Her ability to live independent of the ‘civilized’ lives of the English provides evidence of the potential ‘savageness’ in herself. Paradoxically, her captivity away reveals her entrapment at home.

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<sup>2</sup> Gender frontiers are cultural encounters that result in the confrontation of different gender systems and ideologies, ultimately posing challenges to “‘natural’ categories of gender and shaping colonial experiences (“Gender Frontiers”).

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