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Mary Rowlandson: The Captive Voice

ELIZABETH SCARBROUGH



Elizabeth (Betsy) Scarbrough is an English major with a concentration in writing and a minor in Art. She will graduate in the spring of 2012. This essay was written for Dr. Ann Brunjes's Early American Literature class. Betsy would like to thank Dr. Brunjes not only for the support that she provided but also for her obvious love of teaching and the encouragement she provides all of her students. Without her support, this essay would not have been published. Betsy would also like to thank her husband, Mark, and sons Luke and Gabe for their continued support as she pursues her studies at Bridgewater State University.

The arrival of the Puritans in Massachusetts, the ensuing relationship they developed with the Native Americans and its deterioration over the following years are historical facts that are commonly known, but the reality that numerous women and children were kidnapped for ransom in the years referred to as “King Philip’s War” might surprise many Americans. In fact, on February 20, 1676, in the town of Lancaster, Massachusetts, along with several of her neighbors, Mary Rowlandson and her young daughter were violently ambushed, torn from their homes, and taken hostage by a multi-tribal band of Indians. She was ransomed and released in early May. Several years later she penned the details of her experience.

As a direct result of her captivity, she had the unique opportunity to speak publicly, through her writing, which was not commonly acceptable for women of her time. Because her female voice was powerfully limited by societal and religious expectations, and the trauma she experienced was so intense, it is imperative that the reader pay close attention to the details she chose to relate, and the way she represented her experience in her narrative, bearing in mind that even upon her return to society, she was still captive to the limitations of what a “good wife” was allowed to say. Rowlandson structures her account within the confines of her religion, and provides the reader lessons with regard to providence and virtue. At the same time, however, her writing reveals a societal structure within the native community which depicts her captors as much more than savages, as well as her own strength – both of which challenged the culture in which she lived.

In her world, women were not allowed to hold public office, preach to an assembly, or have authority over men. Had she not been taken hostage, she would probably have lived a very common life – raising her children, tending to the needs of her husband, and adhering to the doctrines of her faith. If she had anything to say about the role of women in her culture, she would have been silenced. In contrast to Anne Bradstreet, who was “the only North American woman author to have published before her” (Salisbury 6), she does not appear to have had aspirations to become an author. Her fame as a writer was based solely on the circumstances resulting from her capture.

It is impossible to evaluate her narrative without considering the powerful role the society in which she lived played in formulating her perspective.

She was a Puritan, she was of English descent, and she was a wife and mother. She also lived in a male dominated society in which women did not have the opportunity to challenge beliefs. When she documented her experience, she knew the expectations of thought and behavior all of these social roles entailed. In this context, it would be foolish to assume that her voice as an author was not limited when she presented her captivity as an historical account. It is probable that she, knowingly or unknowingly, adjusted her experience to please her general audience. In the introduction to *Authority and Female Authorship in Colonial America*, William Scheick writes that "...sites of logonomic conflict can be glimpsed in the unintentional, barely perceptible ruptures occasioned by an author's uneasy attempt to negotiate between orthodox and personal authority" (3).

Mary Rowlandson was a member of a culture which maintained a strong sense of superiority over the Native Americans. In his book *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America*, James Axtell explains that while the natives were initially respectful of the colonists, their opinion changed, "When it became clear, however, that the strangers were disagreeably boastful of their prowess and sought to compromise the autonomy of the natives in nearly every sphere of life..." (19)

At the outset of her narrative this contempt is evident in the terms she uses to describe her captors such as "murtherous wretches" (68), "bloody Heathen" (69) and "ravenous Beasts" (70). But further on in her work, the awkwardness that William Scheick notes is evident throughout Rowlandson's detailed description of her time with the Indians. As she recalls the moment when she starts to weep, after having maintained her composure since her capture, she does not describe the natives as responding harshly to her, but rather with compassion. In fact she explains, "There one of them asked me, why I wept, I could hardly tell what to say: Yet I answered, they would kill me: No, said he, none will hurt you" (82). In the same passage she notes, "Then came one of them and gave me two spoonfulls of Meal to comfort me, and another gave me half a pint of Pease; which was more worth than many Bushels at another time" (82).

After reading of this connection between captive and captor, the reader naturally anticipates that she will go on to explain how this kindness impacted her perception of the natives, but that is not what happens. Instead, she writes that she met King Philip and abruptly changes the subject to decry her former use of tobacco. One gets the impression that this was an uncomfortable moment for her to relate. It is quite plausible that she felt guilty that she had experienced a somewhat

emotionally close encounter with the people she was supposed to hate. Still, she could have made the choice to leave out that rather sentimental moment, since it is in such stark contrast to her prior descriptions of the "Heathen(s)." However, by quickly changing the subject she actually stresses the significance of the encounter more than if she merely said that she appreciated their kindness. Her discomfort is palpable, not so much with the compassion of the Indians, but rather, the *relating* of the tale.

Captivity is complex. The expectation is that the person held captive should detest their aggressor consistently throughout their confinement. The unique situation that is living with one's enemy provides fertile ground for confusion. Even though Rowlandson had plenty to say about the evils of her captors, and certainly she had experienced extreme horrors throughout her ordeal, she depicts several times when the humanity of her kidnappers was what allowed her to survive. Although she could have ignored these in her narrative, she chose to include them. This "gray" thinking was not reflective of the black and white teachings of the Puritans. In his book, *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning*, Mitchell Robert Breitwieser points out that this shift in Rowlandson's style is a progressive change. He states, "But *as she goes along* with the writing, and despite her best intentions, things get loose or come forward that do not reduce entirely to exemplary status without residue, things that therefore adumbrate or signal the vitality of a distinctly non-Puritan view of her experience" (8). She may have stopped short, at times, but her message was not always what she was supposed to say by convention. Planned or not, the effect of this change in writing style revealed perceptions that she would surely have known were unacceptable to voice outright.

In her lifetime, she had experienced the manner in which authorities dealt with women, and what was tolerated with regards to their restricted communication. It is interesting that her mother, Joan White, had been allowed by the church to speak about her conversion, which was very rare. Neal Salisbury describes two very different responses by the church to women speaking publicly. He states:

In publicly relating her conversion experience, White acted in a capacity permitted few New England women in the 1640s. Since 1637, when New England's magistrates and ministers had banished a radical Puritan named Anne Hutchinson, along with her followers, most churches had ceased allowing women to speak publicly in any capacity. Hutchinson had boldly challenged the authority of New England ministers by claiming that all but two of them adhered to a "covenant of works." (9)

It is important to note the fact that while Rowlandson's mother was *allowed* by the church to speak, Anne Hutchinson was not. As a woman who actually spoke not only of her own accord, but confrontationally, she was banished by the community. Since she experienced a three month separation from her loved ones, it is highly unlikely that Rowlandson would have had the desire to write anything in her memoir which might have been construed as contrary to authority. Banishment is forcible removal from a society from within, while kidnapping is aggressive removal from without. In the end, however, they both result in absolute separation from a support system, and the destruction of relationships which have been built over a number of years. It must have been a daunting task for her to compose her narrative while, at the same time, being aware of the consequences should she overstep any boundaries of convention.

Within the realm of societal power over a woman and her behavior, the concept of purity is dominant. A woman who is taken captive may be forced into an unwanted role sexually with any of the men who become her captors. Rowlandson deliberately addresses this topic and does not avoid answering the questions that she certainly knew her readers would be asking. She wrote:

O the wonderfull power of God that I have seen, and the experience that I have had: I have been in the midst of those roaring Lyons, and Salvage Bears, that feared neither God, nor Man, nor the Devil, by night and day, alone and in company: sleeping all sorts together, and yet not one of them ever offered me the least abuse of unchastity to me, in word or action. Though some are ready to say, I speak it for my own credit; But I speak it in the presence of God, and to His glory. (107)

It is clear that her narrative was scrutinized by the public in many ways. In fact, she was accused of taking credit for not having been molested, rather than giving God the glory. She explicitly states that she was never approached in a sexual manner, even stressing how *improbable* it was that she wasn't. When reading this passage, it appears that she feels the need to protect her own reputation. One might wonder how she could have addressed the matter had she actually been raped. It is uncertain in what manner the Puritan population would have responded to the wife of a minister who had been intimate, by choice or not, with a man they considered to be a heathen, as well as not her husband. In a society which perceived that God brings about punishment according to behavior, would she have been depicted as a victim or as a sinful woman who brought on her own defilement? Even if she was acknowledged

as a victim, it would have been difficult to have this type of information assimilated publicly. In the above passage, she points out that she was blamed for taking credit for not being raped; one cannot help but wonder how much more she would have been subjected to judgment if she had.

The fact that a woman was able to survive such harsh conditions, without a man protecting her, challenged the cultural belief that women were weak. While it is true that she gives God the glory for bringing her through the overall ordeal, she also relates her own specific skills which contributed to her survival. One of the most important examples of this involves the recognition of her knitting talent by her captors. In fact, it was this ability that gained her a certain amount of respect within the native society, as well as allowing her to bargain for food which was imperative for her to live long enough to be ransomed and returned to her husband. When she speaks of her talent, she does not seem to feel the need to stress that it was from God. In addition to making a shirt for King Philip's boy (83) she explains, "There was a *Squaw* who spake to me to make a shirt for her *Sannup*, for which she gave me a piece of Bear. Another asked me to knit a pair of Stockins, for which she gave me a quart of Pease" (83). She used her business savvy, possibly gained in the context of captivity, to survive. Her ability to barter, even as she was in an incredibly stressful situation, is evidence of *her own* strength of character. The fact that she sprinkles throughout her narrative the many times the natives specifically requested that she provide them with knitted items shows that she is aware of the fact that her own skills were valuable. That is not to say that she didn't recognize that all talent comes from God; but it seems she was proud of her ability to trade her skills for food. The act of taking any personal credit was crossing the line with regard to Puritan pressure to minimize self and always give God credit for any accomplishment. She doesn't say, "God allowed me to knit" or "my God-given talent." But she also doesn't say, "Since I am an extremely talented woman, I was able to survive." She is careful to simply present the details of the interaction.

And, indeed, she was judged by the public for taking credit, rather than giving God the glory, for circumstances which she obviously had no control over. She did not choose to be taken by the Indians and she did not remain a captive as a result of her own desire. Salisbury notes that, "Although it was never expressed directly, there may also have been resentment over Rowlandson being elevated publicly above the other captives, especially near the end when she was the focus of English efforts at redemption and was in fact the first to be removed" (43). If the mere fact that she was *redeemed from her captivity* was enough to provoke envy, it follows that she would have incited jealousy if she appeared to "brag" in any way. Within her community the possibility of offending public opinion was

lurking behind every statement. As we have seen, she did stretch these boundaries with her accounts of the Indians' kindness, as well as her survival skills, but she did so very cautiously.

There was a specific motivation for publishing her account, which was to promote the Puritan belief that God actively punishes and restores believers. Salisbury focuses on this intent in his introduction when he writes:

There is substantial evidence indicating that Increase Mather played a central role in getting the manuscript published. Mather and the Rowlandsons were old acquaintances, and Mather had gone to the Massachusetts Bay Council just a week after the Lancaster attack with Joseph's request for assistance in securing his family's release. As part of his long project to demonstrate the role of divine providence in shaping human lives and events, Mather had begun as early as 1670 collecting evidence to support his thesis. (44)

With this in mind, it was imperative that her text support, and not introduce questions about, faith with regard to God's divine providence. Her account would not have been published had she written about any unresolved struggles in her faith. She could depict herself as suffering, but she could not, by convention, leave room for any wonder in the reader's mind with regard to the purpose and resolution of her capture. What was written needed to stress God's will and prove God's power. No matter what she had actually experienced, the way it was presented was required to fit within this structure. Even if she had not published her narrative, her belief system restricted her from questioning her experience as she wrote, because to do so would have been to undermine her faith and, according to her account, that faith is what saw her through her ordeal.

What is implied here is not that she did not truly believe that God was in control. The problem lies in the fact that there was no room for her to voice any of her inner struggles or questions, or to challenge any conventions she had accepted before her capture in a direct fashion. She did have a voice, but it was bound to and held captive by convention. It must have been quite difficult for her to fully piece together all of her encounters - the intense emotional suffering she endured as she watched her daughter die over the course of nine days, the memories of seeing the violent deaths of friends and family members, the transition of going from the position of being the respected wife of the minister to being a servant who slept on the ground, as well as wondering if she would ever be returned to her former life. Beyond that was the knowledge that her former life didn't actually exist anymore.

Structuring these gut wrenching emotions into a narrative that frankly states "It is not my tongue, or pen can express the sorrows of my heart, and bitterness of my spirit, that I had this departure: but God was with me, in a wonderful manner, carrying me along, and bearing up my spirit, that it did not quite fail" (73) and after describing her dying child as constantly moaning and saying over and over, "I shall dy, I shall dy" (73) ending her paragraph with "But the Lord renewed my strength still, and carried me along, that I might see more of his Power; yea, so much that I could never have thought of, had I not experienced it" (73) fit convention. She could not have said that she felt that God had deserted her, that these circumstances were unfair, or that she had lost her faith. There is no way to know if she had any of these thoughts or feelings. But the question must be asked, "If she did have any of these struggles, would she have felt that she could have included them in her narrative?" That is highly doubtful.

The extreme transition to another culture, spiritually as well as physically, certainly opened the door to a broader point of view in contrast to the limited world she had lived within her entire life. In her book *Captivity and Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature*, Michelle Burnham writes.

This Puritan Englishwoman's extended habitation within the radically alien culture of her Indian captors necessarily makes her narrative a history of transculturation and of a subjectivity under revision. Such conflict and its effect on the texture of Rowlandson's account has become, for recent readers, the most fascinating aspect of her text... (14).

The texture of her account does change throughout. She begins by dramatically relating the violence of her capture and her "...narrative ends with a tone of calm and a noticeable absence of descriptive detail" (Burnham 11). But even in the beginning, it should be noted that she cannot write about her dying daughter without distancing herself from her - and this is certainly a confirmation of the Puritan attitudes toward mourning in which Rowlandson has been raised. She calls her "babe" and "it" in the same paragraph (74-75). One word shows the intense love of her motherly bond, and the other sounds as if she is talking about a thing. She is clearly conflicted, and probably just trying to survive the overwhelming and profound emotions she was forced to experience, the living nightmare of watching her own child die slowly, with no way to save her. But she was also part of a culture with a unique view of mourning. As Breitweiser writes.

In the seventeenth century, Anglo-American Protestantism was not yet sufficiently genteel to oppose emotional intensities per se, so its injunctions against grieving have to have more to do with grief's content, its intrinsic thought, than with its amplitude. Unfortunately, Puritan writing is for the most part practical and militant, rather than theoretical and multisided, so no Puritan text I know of explains the origin of the hostility to mourning or registers mourning as other than a force haunting the periphery of thought, though there are many texts that express or deploy the hostility. (21)

Breitweiser argues, then, that Rowlandson is reflecting a kind of intrinsic Puritan hostility toward mourning. She was not allowed to address her grief directly in her narrative without accepting it, as well, as part of the overall plan of God's judgment. She could not express anger, depression, or any resentment she may have felt about the death of her child, because her voice, as a Puritan woman, was restrained. While it is true that other aspects of Rowlandson's narrative reflect what Burnham describes as "a history of trans-culturation and of a subjectivity under revision" (14), the root of her conflicted response was firmly grounded in Puritan norms.

Toward the end of her narrative, Rowlandson does reveal how this traumatic experience has changed her peace. She says, "I can remember the time, when I used to sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts, whole nights together, but now it is other ways with me. When all are fast about me, and no eye open, but his who ever waketh, my thoughts are upon things past..." (111). Of course, she quickly explains that while even though so much bad has happened, it is all good in the end because it is God's work. She may have revealed more of her inner struggle than she intended, though, when she wrote, "And I hope I can say, in some measure, As David did, It is good for me that I have been afflicted" (112). She was *supposed to say* she could, for certain. Even though her voice was captive to religious and cultural expectations, her written words both respectfully and gently challenged the boundaries.

Freedom of speech is relative. With that freedom are implied conditions for every author. If one is challenging public norms, there is always the possibility of confrontation. Within that arena, the author will either choose to fight for a purpose or concept, or surrender to popular belief.

Given the emotionally and physically overwhelming nature of her captivity, Rowlandson was faced with the immediate need to adjust to, and live within, a society with some very different cultural behaviors than she was used to. The dynamics of her captivity forced her to adapt in a way that the majority of people never have to face. For her to then have to *justify how she responded* was yet another captivity – that of public opinion. It seems she was consistently in the position of trying to satisfy people in order to thrive. Interestingly, within her narrative she was able to provide some small glimpses into a culture that was detested. She may not have realized that though her words supported the tenets of her religious beliefs, as well as the colonial perception of superiority, she also revealed, both by what she did and did not say, that she may have had opinions and experiences that did not conform to the rules.

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